

# United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP)

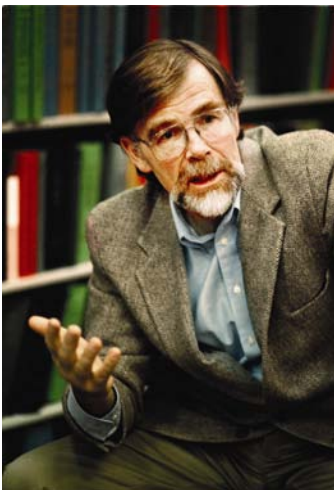
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Thomas G. Weiss présente le Projet d'histoire intellectuelle des Nations Unies dont il est l'un des initiateurs. L'UNIHP, qui est un projet totalement indépendant, dispose d'un budget d'environ 5 millions de dollars contribué par plusieurs gouvernements (Pays Bas Royaume-Uni, Suède) et des fondations privées américaines. Il bénéficie du soutien continu du Secrétaire Général. J. Richardson a rendu compte du premier volume publié par ce projet « Ahead the curve » dans le N° 82 de LIEN (octobre-décembre 2002). Ce volume examine les idées qui ont conduit au lancement de la première décennie du développement et à la création de ce qui est devenu aujourd'hui l'Organisation mondiale du commerce (OMC).

Les « Voix des Nations Unies » dont Ali Kazancigil rend compte ci-après fait partie du même projet.

L'histoire intellectuelle des Nations Unies a deux branches principales : une série de 16 volumes centrés sur des aspects spécifiques et une série de 76 interviews. Elle a pour ambition d'analyser les idées motrices et les concepts clés pour le développement social et économique depuis 60 ans qui ont été conçus ou promus et développés sous les auspices des Nations Unies. L'auteur insiste sur l'importance capitale des idées et plaide pour que l'effort de recherche soit continué grâce à un financement approprié, au recrutement de bons chercheurs et à la diffusion des résultats.

## The United Nations Intellectual History Project: An Inside View



Thomas G. Weiss

In 2005 for the UN's sixtieth anniversary, several crucial documents were put before Member States: High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility* (2004); Millennium Project, *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals* (2005);

and Kofi A. Annan, *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All* (2005). As the world organization moved into its seventh decade, the September 2005 World Summit struggled with many issues but largely without historical context. Perhaps most significantly, the assembled presidents, prime ministers, and princes paid no attention to one of the UN's strengths, its intellectual influence – what political scientists like Harvard University's Joseph Nye would call the world organization's “soft power”.

*UNIHP: an independent analytical effort that seeks to document the world organization's role in the creation, discussion, and dissemination of ideas.*

As UNESCO embarks on its own effort to explore the past, it is useful to bring to bear the experience from the past seven years of a wide-ranging research effort by the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP), an independent analytical effort that seeks to document the world organization's role in the creation, discussion, and dissemination of ideas. Taking to heart George Santayana's plea – “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” – Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and I began this long overdue effort in 1999.

While ideas and concepts are a main driving force in human progress – and they are arguably the most important contribution of the United Nations – until recently there had been little historical study of the origins and evolution of the history of economic and social ideas cultivated within the world organization and of their impact on wider thinking and international action. This UNIHP seeks to fill this knowledge gap by tracing the origin and analyzing the evolution of key ideas and concepts about international economic and social

development born or nurtured under UN auspices. This is not cheerleading but telling honestly an essential and under-documented story. We were delighted that a host of private foundations and governments agreed that we were on the right track

and supported our efforts – more information is available on [www.unhistory.org](http://www.unhistory.org)

Our effort does not purport to provide a definitive, comprehensive history of the institution, but we are making a stab at documenting some of its most important ideas. Less than one member in ten of today's human family was alive when the United Nations was founded in 1945. Even fewer were old enough to have followed those pioneering events in any detail. Six decades later, a critical appreciation of the UN's record could help inform current debates about the world body's relevance and effectiveness.

Our starting-point was contained in the last two sentences of the project's first volume: "People matter. Ideas matter." The two main components of our research go a long way toward substantiating that claim.

The first consists of oral histories from 76 leading personalities who have played important roles in the UN's history. Excerpts appear in an unusual book, *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice*. There is no need to examine here that book and UNIHP's oral histories as they are reviewed in depth elsewhere in this issue. I will, however, urge readers to take a close look at what are a diverse set of stories woven together in a compelling way – they put meat on the bones of our claim that people matter. Moreover, we currently are

assembling the complete transcripts of the individuals whom we interviewed on a CD-ROM so that they can be used in libraries and research institutes worldwide. As former Under Secretary-General Sir Brian Urquhart told us: "One of the troubles with the UN, which you are now rather belatedly remedying, is the fact that it never had a historical section. I spent years and years, from the time when I was the personal assistant to Trygve Lie, trying to get them to establish a historical section, so that people in all parts of the UN would actually record at the time what they were doing, instead of doing it 50 years later with a sort of *esprit d'escalier*."

The second component consists of a book series from leading authorities on specific ideas. With the exception of a forthcoming handbook, the volumes are published by Indiana University Press. I list them below for ease of reference.

As a co-director I am proud of our accomplishments to date and hardly objective, and so readers may find more persuasive the words of Robert Berg – an experienced official and consultant for a host of international institutions. His review of the first seven books in the current issue of the journal *Global Governance* states: "At the outset, the series must be applauded for editorial excellence. Each of the books is clearly organized and each chapter nicely presented, with concepts well outlined and well summarized. The writing is lucid and at times

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- *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges*, by Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss (2001, 2nd edition 2003; French, German, Arabic editions 2003).
  - *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas: Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions*, edited by Yves Berthelot with contributions from Adebayo Adedeji, Yves Berthelot, Leelananda de Silva, Paul Rayment, Gert Rosenthal, and Blandine Destremeau (2004).
  - *Quantifying the World: UN Contributions to Statistics*, by Michael Ward (2004).
  - *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice*, by Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, Dharam Ghai, and Frédéric Lapeyre (2004).
  - *The UN and Global Political Economy: Trade, Finance, and Development*, by John Toye and Richard Toye (2004).
  - *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice*, by Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij, and Richard Jolly (2005).
  - *Women, Development, and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice*, by Devaki Jain (2005).
  - *Human Security and the UN: A Critical History*, by S. Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Foong-Khong (2006).
  - *The Human Rights Ideas at the United Nations: The Political History of Universal Justice*, by Sarah Zaidi and Roger Normand (2007).
  - *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*, edited by Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws (2007, to be published by Oxford University Press).
  - *The UN and Development Cooperation*, by Olav Stokke (forthcoming).
  - *The UN and the Global Commons: Development without Destruction*, by Nico Schrijver (forthcoming).
  - *The UN and Transnationals, from Code to Compact*, by Tagi Segafi-nejad with John Dunning (forthcoming).
  - *The UN and Global Governance: An Idea and its Prospects*, by Ramesh Thakur and Thomas G. Weiss (forthcoming).
  - *Preventive Diplomacy at the UN: The Journey of an Idea*, by Bertram G. Ramcharan (forthcoming).
  - *The United Nations: A History of Ideas and Their Future*, by Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss (forthcoming).

eloquent. Scholars are treated to thousands of footnotes, but the texts can also be easily comprehended by intelligent lay readers.” (Vol. 12, No. 3, 2006, p. 326).

“So what?” some may be tempted to ask. We placed a question mark in the title of our first volume, *Ahead of the Curve?*, to indicate honest uncertainty about our early conclusions. Today, we feel less need to be tentative. For the UN’s sixtieth anniversary, Jolly, Emmerij, and I put forward a brief interim evaluation, *The Power of UN Ideas: Lessons from the First 60 Years* – this analysis can be downloaded from our website. The UN, in its economic and social development work, has often been significantly in advance of governments, academics, and other international institutions that later adopted its ideas. The record clearly shows the pioneering nature of many of the UN’s contributions.

**Three conclusions that jumped to our eyes:**

- Although the world organization receives more media attention for its efforts in peace and security, its contributions to ideas, analysis, and policymaking in the economic and social arena stand out as among its most important achievements.
- UN ideas and thinking in the economic and social arenas have had a major positive impact in many countries, those better off and those still very poor. There are also many areas where the organization ought to have made contributions but failed to do so – as well as others where the UN’s contribution was too little and too late.
- The successes and failures reflect the strengths and weaknesses of commitment and support from the “two United Nations”– the Member States and the staff members. The contributions of many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other individuals to international conversations and norms have been significant enough on many occasions to refer to them as the “third UN”.

To grasp the full scale of the UN’s achievements, one needs to see them in context. The need to avoid the slaughter and misery of more world wars and another Great Depression – as well as the failure of the League of Nations – were at the center of the vision that drove the hopes and focused the minds of those who created the next generation of international institutions. The basic structures, designed

during World War II and in the first decade or two afterwards, were all directed to these ends. But what made the UN’s design and establishment so remarkable was its broader ambition – for human rights on a global scale, for sovereign independence and freedom and democracy in all parts of the world, for improvements in living standards worldwide. Many dismissed these possibilities as little more than pie-in-the-sky idealism, but much of this early vision has, in fact, been achieved. No period in human history has seen so many people benefiting through advances in life expectancy, health, education and living standards, as in the UN’s lifetime.

Inevitably, faith in the early hopes has wavered, especially when they have clashed with harsh realities of international politics and conflicting economic interests. Even so, the vision and early ambitions have never been entirely lost – and the United Nations has continued to refashion its goals and objectives through the ups and downs of subsequent decades.

**The world organization’s record deserves to be better known.**

Policymakers are often unaware both of the UN’s achievements and shortcomings in meeting intellectual challenges. Better awareness of the past would provide clearer perspectives on the potential of ideas, on what could and should be supported.

The UNIHP is now in mid-course, and others may interpret our findings differently. It would be useful to highlight what we thought were the most salient lessons for the UN’s sixtieth anniversary – and perhaps for UNESCO as it moves toward embarking soon on its own history. They are:

- The contributions of ideas, analysis, and policymaking in the economic and social arenas have been among the UN’s most important achievements. They have had a significant influence on national and international action. This can be judged by the extent to which UN ideas have often set paths that others have followed. Perhaps the clearest examples are global conferences setting goals and benchmarks that many countries have chosen to follow and that have influenced their policies and outcomes.
- The UN’s original vision was built on four pillars. The first three – peace, development, and human rights – have come closer together. Although initially separate, these three pillars now support a consistent and integrated frame of national and international priorities, applicable

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as guidelines for developed and developing countries. UNDP's annual *Human Development Report* elaborates a methodological frame for integrating, analytically and operationally, these three pillars.

- The UN's fourth founding pillar, sovereign independence for all countries, was largely achieved during the UN's first two decades. But it is now under scrutiny because of a concern for reasonable limits on state sovereignty in situations where human rights (as from genocide or civil war) or human security are threatened (as from terrorism). This debate has already produced new ideas and norms, including the "responsibility to protect". Over time, additional principles should be incorporated into a broader and more consistent frame for development.

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- The United Nations has a record of being boldly ahead of the curve, moving beyond conventional wisdom and sometimes confronting that wisdom with alternative thinking and policy proposals. This reflects at least in part its multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral structure and the egalitarian representation of countries in its governance structures. The UN has frequently been more ready than other international institutions to develop positions at variance with those of the major powers and to put its finger on issues not yet on the formal agenda. This comparative advantage should be encouraged. Pressures to be "politically correct" or "realistic" – from North or South, from diplomats or UN staff – should be resisted. Mistakes, of course, will be made. But what seems outlandish yesterday often quickly becomes today's challenge and tomorrow's received wisdom.

*What are the intellectual challenges ahead?*

- In the early 1980s there was an international shift of focus and financial support from the UN to the World Bank and the IMF, leaving the UN with the role of constructive dissent rather than active initiative. This has gone too far. Indeed, the World Bank and sometimes the IMF have later adopted positions earlier pioneered or promoted by the United Nations – but which they initially opposed. There are many essential examples in the longer record – notably the Special UN Fund for Economic Development

(SUNFED) leading to the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA) in the 1950s, the goals for the development decade in the 1960s, for basic needs in the 1970s, and for poverty reduction today.

Three facts emerge from the UN's history in economic and social matters. The first is how much the UN has contributed to economic and social thinking and widespread ideas of the second half of the twentieth century. The second is how many of these ideas have had a major and worthwhile impact. And the third is how many of the early ideas have emerged in response to initiatives of the dominant economic powers, especially those of the United States, even if Washington subsequently appears to have forgotten many of its early contributions. Gert Rosenthal, the former executive secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and now Guatemala's foreign minister, told us that the UN and its ideas influenced policy over time: "And all of a sudden, maybe two, three, five years after the document came out, everyone is repeating some of its main points as if they were gospel."

If this line of reasoning is correct – and our reading of the analyses presented to date suggests that it is – what are the intellectual challenges ahead? We have consistently maintained that the UNIHP is about "forward-looking history".

In looking ahead, our reading of the project's findings leads us to identify three types of challenges: intellectual, participatory, and personnel.

First, there are numerous areas where new thinking and research are urgently required and where the UN should be encouraged to do far more creative work. Our priority list for intellectual inquiry would include:

- The growing divide between the Islamic world and the West – with attention to the political, cultural, religious, and development dimensions.
- Measures of human security, for which integrated approaches toward comprehensive collective security should be explored beyond the traditional compass of either the military or national security forces.

- New measures to support development in the least developed countries and countries in transition.
- Sensitivity and action to take into account cultural aspects in the development equation, leading to regional differentiation of economic and social development strategies.
- Measures to respond to the long-run challenges of environment and sustainability, where action is missing or inadequate, including global warming and measures to offset its consequences, especially for poorer countries.
- Global economic inequalities – once front and center – should return to the agenda, along with international measures to moderate and diminish those inequalities and their consequences.
- Mechanisms to ensure genuine international competition and free markets, with especial attention to operations of transnational.

Second, actions are needed in the longer run to strengthen developing country participation in the management of the global economy. The other side of this coin is to offset the imbalances in bargaining power facing weaker countries when participating in global economic institutions. Our examination of UN history has revealed how asymmetrical power among countries has shaped global economic relationships and institutional structures. One of the major contributions of the world organization has been to analyze the implications for the economic and social development of poorer countries and to devise possible corrective measures. As we move further into the twenty-first century, faster progress toward the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the poorest and least developed countries is necessary but insufficient.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the priority challenges ahead in economic and social development require the United Nations to seize its comparative advantage in exerting intellectual leadership. This means strengthening the institutional capacity to generate and disseminate original ideas – in short, to ensure creative thinking. Of course, the world organization no longer has the international intellectual arena to itself as it had in its earlier years because subsequent decades have witnessed an enormous growth in intellectual institutions that compete with the UN in the marketplace of ideas. Nonetheless there is much more room for imagination.

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Myriad proposals for reforming the United Nations are already on the table. Indeed, the mere mention of “reform” tends to make eyes glaze over. Yet one way to restore vitality would be to infuse neglected and vital intellectual dimensions, which are totally absent in ongoing discussions. Specific measures are required to strengthen this aspect in the immediate future. Concrete examples emerging from the United Nations Intellectual History Project include five steps. These are all “Track II” reforms that do not require constitutional changes (that is, official approval by Member States) or additional resources. They do, however, require vision, courage, and leadership:

- The recognition by all parts of the UN system that contributions to ideas, thinking, analysis, and monitoring in their areas of international action should be a major component of their work.
- To this end, the UN needs to foster an environment that encourages and rewards creative thinking of the highest intellectual quality. This has implications for recruitment and promotion, especially to assemble under one roof professionals from different disciplines and from different national and cultural backgrounds. The quality of staff is essential, and no compromise can be made here in ensuring the highest standards of competence.
- The mobilization of more financial support for research, analysis, and policy exploration is a top priority. The terms for providing such resources are of special importance—to ensure longer-term availability and flexibility and, more importantly, to guarantee intellectual autonomy.
- Strengthening the means to disseminate new ideas is equally important. UN outreach with a core of key reports is sometimes impressive. At the same time, too many reports languish on book shelves, coffee tables, or filing cabinets. Discussion should not only take place in inter-governmental settings but in capitals with governments and among such diverse constituencies as business, the media, and members of civil society.
- A crucial challenge is improving relations between the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions to encourage better interchange of ideas and experience and a less skewed allocation of international resources between them.

With a few months to go before the selection of the eighth Secretary-General, signposts leading from the United Nations Intellectual History Project return to our point of departure, namely: “Ideas matter. People matter”. Indeed, our interim examination of the first six decades of the world organization’s history demonstrates that there have been many solid ideas and many skilled people. There could and should be more of both. They are, in our view, at the heart of the world organization’s most important contributions and its comparative advantage. As Berg (p. 339) concludes his review of our first books: “In an era preoccupied with hard power, this series highlights the soft powers of the UN: in the creation of ideas; in benchmarking series of data; in public campaigns and political mobilizations to disseminate

ideas; and in dialogues to provide peer learning. In the long run of history, these may well turn out to be the UN results that matter most.”

Thomas G. Weiss \*

\* Thomas G. Weiss is Presidential Professor of Political Science and co-director of the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) located at the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at The City University of New York’s Graduate Center. He was awarded the “Grand Prix Humanitaire de France 2006” and serves on the International Scientific Committee for UNESCO’s History Project. He has written or edited some 35 books and numerous scholarly articles about multilateral approaches to international peace and security, humanitarian action, and sustainable development.

## The UN Ideas From Within: An Oral History\*

*UN Voices* is about the world organization’s ideas and policies on economic and social development, told by some of those who took part in their emergence and application. This oral history book contains chronologically and thematically presented extracts from the recordings of lengthy interviews (on the average, 4 hours per interview) conducted by the four authors. The interviews include 73 individuals, who are part of the UN elite: Secretaries-General, Heads of Agencies, USGs, ADGs, Directors, distinguished advisors and researchers, two of whom are Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences Laureates. The authors acknowledge in the introduction that this sample of prominent men and a few women, although carefully selected along objective criteria, cannot be representative, and many more interviews will be conducted, in the framework of the United Nations Intellectual History Project, with less known people, who were part of the UN adventure.

The complete versions of the interviews will be made available on CD-ROM. Such oral archives will be valuable sources for researchers and others interested in the intellectual history of UN, in addition to written archives.

The extracts from the interviews are accompanied and framed by narrative parts, written by the authors, to relate conversations to their historical and institutional contexts. The book is organized in three Parts. Part One, “Individuals Make a Difference”, has three biographical Chapters, on the family, educational and career backgrounds of the interviewees. In the chronologically structured

Part Two, the five Chapters span from the pre-World War II years, to 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century, through 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Part Three is a thematic one. Its four Chapters deal with the institutional issues, people and ideas in the UN, as well as future challenges.



Ali Kazancigil

In many ways, *UN Voices* is a pioneering book, showing that the world organization is not just a huge bureaucracy, impenetrable to outsiders, and focusing on its high quality human and intellectual substance. It is celebratory, but the UN needs celebration, as the British historian Emma Rothschild notes in the “Foreword”. It is well-written, competent and informative. It will be valuable for researchers, and at the same time make a pleasant reading for a larger readership interested in the UN. Hopefully, it will be instrumental in increasing UN-friendly citizens, throughout the world.

To active and retired international civil servants, going through its 520 pages, “hearing” the voices of remarkable people such as Kofi Annan, Lourdes Arizpe, Elise Boulding, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Celso Furtado, Stéphane Hessel, Enrique Iglesias,

Lawrence Klein, Conor Cruise O’Brian, Ignacy Sachs, Juan Somavia, Amartya Sen and Brian Urquhart, to cite a few of the interviewees, should be a memorable experience.

Thanks to competent and rigorous interviewers and the quality of the interviewees, a considerable number of ideas and issues are discussed in the book, including some that are controversial, such as the New International Economic Order (NIEO), sustainability, transnational corporations, the basic needs approach, the misfortunes of the North-South dialogue, the debt problem, the Washington Consensus<sup>1</sup>, human security, global governance, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), tensions in the UN system and the Global Compact.

However, after having gone through the book, the reader, at least the present one, remains with a sense that something is missing. The authors anticipate “three generic criticisms” of the use they made of the “voices” (pp. 10-11). To this reviewer, they do not constitute the main criticisms that can be addressed to the book.

The first one concerns “self-serving and selective memories”. But, this is a built-in feature of the oral history method, and there are ways of mitigating it, with carefully prepared questions and by confronting the interviews to various other sources. The authors did both. The second is that the sample is drawn only from the UN elite. This will not be a problem either, as long as the number of interviews grows over time, and the UNIHP is committed to do this. The third anticipated criticism is “an eclecticism that draws upon existing theories and a small number of interviews”. This probably refers to possible reactions from researchers. However, although it will be of interest to researchers, the book is basically for a large readership, beyond the Academe, and there is no reason to be apologetic about that, on the contrary, regardless of what the peer groups will have to say about it.

<sup>1</sup> “Washington Consensus” is the generic name of a series of neo-liberal development policies (reducing the role of the state and public services, promoting privatization in all fields) which were imposed on developing countries, in 1980s and early 1990s, by certain Western countries (notably the USA and UK), as well as the World Bank and IMF. Given their disastrous results and destructive impact on societies, these recipes have been abandoned and this so-called consensus was laid to rest by mid-1990s.

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The reason for coming out of the book with a sense of relative dissatisfaction results from the insufficiently critical character of the narratives which accompany the interviews. Admittedly, the narratives were not made to contradict and criticize directly the interviewees. However, a greater distance and a little less empathy between the “voices” and narratives would have been

welcome, all the more so because the interviews were not anonymous, and will be made immediately available on CD-ROM. These are perfectly legitimate and understandable options taken by the authors (see Appendix 2 on the methodology). However, the consequence was, as acknowledged by the authors, that a number of controversial and delicate UN ideas, debates and struggles have most probably not been exposed by the interviewees. This could have been overcome by giving the assurances that those parts of the interview records that the interviewees did not wish to make public immediately, could have been separately archived, for later disclosure, at agreed dates. This was not done and unfortunately the narratives do not seem to have adequately filled the “silences” in the conversations.

Certain statements by the interviewees about important UN-related ideas, policies could have been better framed by the narratives. In clear-cut cases, such as the disastrous imposition by the western member states and Bretton Woods Institutions, of neo-liberal development policies, under the so-called “Washington Consensus” the interviewees themselves have been frank and critical enough (pp. 265-272). But, on other issues, such as global governance, the Global Compact, the MDGs, or anti-poverty strategies, the narratives should have critically completed the conversations.

Let us start with the example of the Global Compact, an alliance between the UN and the transnational corporations (TNCs) to promote UN development goals. Under the condition of neo-liberal globalization, this was a useful initiative on the part of Kofi Annan. Some “voices”, like J.G. Ruggie, explain that it was a direct response to globalization (p. 285). Others, such as Michael Doyle, are more prudent and stress the fact that the Global Compact has yet to demonstrate its usefulness (p. 311). More regrettably, the narratives

do not analyze critically the Global Compact. Yet the latter is not a success story, to say the least<sup>1</sup>. There is not much either about the fact that the TNCs have given ample evidence about the way they consider the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), which is supposed to be the normative framework of their participation in the Global Compact: just an element of their corporate communication strategies!

Global governance is discussed almost exclusively in relation to the MDGs and international independent commissions. This is regrettable, even if this is the topic of another book, in the UNIHP series. Its institutional architecture, the role and place of the UN in it are practically absent. Equally surprising, there is no focus, but dispersed elements, on multilateralism. Yet the shortcomings in these areas are amongst the more important problems of our time. They would have deserved more focused attention in the conversations, and in the narratives.

The circumstances of the emergence of the MDGs and their significance are exposed by the “voices”, but mainly in the form of advocacy. The narratives fail to introduce a more balanced view on the current state of affairs concerning the MDGs, which are not being implemented as expected.

As for poverty reduction, the top priority of the MDGs, its treatment is scattered and disappointing. Secretary-General Kofi Annan affirms that UN’s “Addressing extreme poverty is priority number one” for the UN (p. 357). Many other “voices” talk about the problem in general terms. Yet the narratives do not address the debatable handling of this issue at the UN. In the initial development decades, poverty as such was not at all, or insufficiently addressed (for example the well-intentioned basic needs approach did not prove to be really efficient). Later, in 1980s and 1990s, it became the focus of all attentions, but at the expense of coherent development policies.

Unfortunately, the UN still continues to address a symptom – poverty – in ways that are cut-off from, or at least not properly articulated with development

strategies and policies addressing its root causes, which are growing inequalities, biased resource allocation and lack of adequate redistributive policies. In other words, the UN, including MDGs, accept a “charity-like” approach to poverty, framed by the neo-liberal ideology. Not much of this appears in the “voices”, with few exceptions, and regrettably in the narratives.

However, the above criticisms and regrets do not fundamentally change the initial assessment of *UN Voices*: It convincingly shows the importance of ideas and intellectual work in the UN, through the voices of individuals who significantly contributed to them. It makes us understand the role of cognitive power and knowledge in an institution, the UN.

This book and the UNIHP illustrate the value of thinking and assessing the history of the UN system from within. Let us hope that the UNESCO History Project and its Oral History component, which have started in 2006, will encourage critical reflexivity in UNESCO. Critical historical studies and critical thinking about their own past and present activities, as well as on their successes and failures, are indispensable for all UN bodies, if they are to cope effectively with current and future challenges.

Ali Kazancigil

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\* Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (United Nations Intellectual History Project Series), Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2005, XX-520 pages, Appendixes, Notes, Indexes. US\$29.95.

<sup>1</sup> See Ann Zammit, *Development at Risk. Rethinking UN-Business Partnerships*, Geneva, The South Centre and UNRISD, 2003.