

CONFERENCE NEWS

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Social Knowledge and International Policy Making *Exploring the Linkages*

*Report of the UNRISD Conference
20–21 April 2004, Geneva*

Introduction

A question often asked of United Nations (UN) agencies and their research activities is whether the knowledge they generate is useful for international policy making. Implicit in this broad question are others concerning the relevance, quality, dissemination and impact of research.

- Are researchers addressing the sorts of issues and questions of concern to policy makers?
- Do research findings reach policy makers and inform policy making both internationally and at the country level?
- Who conducts UN research, and how does research commissioned by international and bilateral agencies interact with researchers in developing countries and affect their research agenda?
- Is UN research sufficiently independent and critical?
- Can UN research add anything to that being undertaken within the Bretton Woods institutions (BWIs), universities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)?

Underlying such questions is *often* the erroneous assumption that knowledge and policy stand in a direct or unproblematic relation to each other. To understand how research may influence policy it is necessary to examine how the relationship is mediated by politics, discourse, subjectivity and learning. It is also important to understand the implications of new institutional developments associated with networking, public-private partnerships, “knowledge agencies” and organizational learning.

To address these questions, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) organized a two-day conference to examine the linkages between research, activism and policy making related to social development issues. The conference, which also commemorated UNRISD’s fortieth anniversary, set out to assess the intellectual contribution of UN research; its impact on policy making; technical aspects related to the relevance, coordination and dissemination of research; the nature of relations between international development research and the academic and activist communities, particularly in developing countries; and the current and future status of independent and critical research within the UN system. This report summarizes some of the main discussions and debates, drawing on both oral presentations and written contributions. The conference agenda, and a list of speakers and chairpersons, appear at the end of this report.



Renewing Intellectual Pluralism

Emma Rothschild opened the conference by paying tribute to the role of UNRISD in helping to shape thinking on social development within and beyond the UN; and doing this by establishing and nurturing connections between intellectuals from both the North and the South. The work of UNRISD represents an implicit challenge to the unspoken tendency in some quarters for analysis to take place in the global North, while the global South is relegated to fieldwork or case studies. As a contributor to the world of ideas within the UN system, UNRISD has played a significant part in shaping the contemporary understanding of development as being social, in all its dimensions, as well as economic. As the UN's global responsibilities become more burdensome, and its roles more complex, the need for critical thinking assumes even greater importance.

Expanding on these remarks, Thandika Mkandawire stressed the importance to UNRISD that its work not only be academic, but also contribute to shaping policy. The technical means now exist to make research accessible to policymakers. Whether the latter are receptive, however, depends on the wider policy culture and the prevailing institutional arrangements. As an autonomous body within the UN system, UNRISD has considerable freedom to choose research themes and methodologies, and can promote and legitimize independent analysis, without being swayed by partisan or political ideologies. This is not to pretend, however, that research is completely immune to pressures of this kind, as well as to questions of whose voices are heard, and whose are silenced. UNRISD research may, therefore, address controversial or politically charged issues, but always on the basis of a commitment to scientific quality and to intellectual pluralism. UNRISD seeks to mobilize researchers around issues of importance to policy, and can play a part in exposing the work of individual researchers to a wider international audience. There are questions, however, of how UN research more generally serves to shape Southern research agendas and of how such research affects and is, in turn, affected by policies and programmes on the ground.

In his keynote address, José Antonio Ocampo argued that while ideas *do* matter, particularly when they have institutional backing, knowledge is deeply affected by ideology and interests and is therefore influenced by a wide range of competing factors not related to ideas *per se*. In other words, ideas interplay with processes that are governed by a welter of other considerations.

In addition, all knowledge systems have blind spots, or areas in which questions are not admitted or cannot be addressed. Not all schools of thought entertain the pluralist liberal principle that allows the possibility of error or partial vision, and embraces critical debate. This has major implications for the role that research can potentially play in influencing policy, let alone reaching into arenas where only a limited range of ideas enter the domain of public discussion. Furthermore, much of what is assumed to be knowledge or information is essentially opinion, which may or may not be informed by some form of knowledge. Financial markets, for example, depend on expectations or opinions about the future, not on established facts or knowledge.

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Permeated by the principles embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations has been open to new thinking in a wide range of areas: gender equality, the environment, the rights of indigenous peoples and so on. In all of these, the UN continues to be a major source of thinking and intellectual debate. In recent decades, however, the intellectual leadership in the field of economic development has moved from the UN to the BWIs, principally the World Bank. This shift reflects an explicit decision by major member states, and has led the BWIs to accumulate a far greater research capacity (human and financial) compared with that of the UN.

Research by the intergovernmental organizations has played a variable role in policy decisions. In the case of state-led industrialization (or the import-substitution model), which was promoted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) from the late 1940s, practice preceded policy and policy preceded theory. In this case, theory served to rationalize practices that were already in place and responded to domestic demands. In contrast, over the last 25 years, theory associated with neoliberalism has preceded policy. In this case, a particular knowledge system was applied to—or even imposed on—diverse realities, often with unfortunate conse-

quences. Evidence suggests that it is better to adapt knowledge to local circumstances by introducing debates at the national level and building on these to generate specific policies and practices.

Such an approach to building a relationship between research and policy making is far less likely in an intellectual world that is characterized by a strong centre-periphery component. In the realm of economic ideas, this is the case today. In the 1950s and 1960s, regional economic research bodies, such as ECLAC, could influence the terms in which policy discussions were couched. Also, in the centre, different schools of thought competed with each other. This allowed for a diversity of views and schools of thought to permeate and enliven international economic debate. Today, the centre-periphery system in the generation of economic ideas is much stronger, and we could say that even European economic thinking has become peripheral. Many economics students, including some of tomorrow's policy makers and policy analysts, are growing up in an intellectual universe dominated almost exclusively by United States (US) academia. Furthermore, policy research networks have become increasingly privatized by virtue of their reliance on revenues generated by consultancy contracts. Such a knowledge structure is highly constrained in its ability to engage in independent critical thinking. So, we have much less pluralism.

The only way to counter this situation is to renew the intellectual pluralism that allows for and encourages different points of view in all institutional settings, and to admit willingly that there may be other ways to examine an issue, or new questions to be asked. This will require the fostering of strong national institutions and truly pluralistic international bodies in all fields of inquiry concerning development policy.

The Language of Development

Terms such as “poverty reduction”, “participation” and “empowerment” are a universal feature in development policy and project documents emanating from the United Nations, the World Bank, bilateral agencies, NGOs and grassroots organizations. Clearly, the worldviews inspiring these institutions are diverse, and sometimes divergent—hence the adoption of qualifiers such as “people-centred”, “pro-poor” or “rights-based” in order to stake out the differences. The contribution by Andrea Corn-

wall and Karen Brock examined the ways in which these benign-sounding terms have entered mainstream development policy discourse, and in so doing become “buzzwords”, acquiring new connotations or having been emptied of any useful meaning.

Without a structural analysis of poverty within a given situation, it follows that neither PRSPs nor MDGs address issues of power. The orthodox development jargon thus confers a semblance of coherence while masking or neutralizing dissonant elements. The resulting discourse is therefore both political in intent, and depoliticizing in effect.

An analysis of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) shows that, despite their distinct provenance, and relative emphasis on the moral and pragmatic imperatives respectively, both emerge from the same basic ideology: that of a collective responsibility for reducing multidimensional poverty.

Poverty reduction was promoted by the World Bank in the early 1970s as one means of preventing the poor from seeking solutions in communism, while “popular participation” was the cornerstone of the “basic needs” approach being promoted at that time by the UN. “Empowerment” had its roots outside the mainstream development arena, in a transformational project of collective mobilization by oppressed and marginalized groups to claim their rights. Within the neoliberal policy framework that has gained momentum since the 1980s, “community participation” and “ownership” have come to refer to cost sharing by the intended beneficiaries of aid projects, with varying amounts of prior consultation. Such participation essentially serves to cast political problems as technical in nature. In arguing for the now-attenuated state to be brought back into development, and for “good governance”, the World Bank began to invite participation by selected civil society organizations to exert influence over policy makers and hold government “accountable”. Despite this participatory veneer, many observers view the PRSPs as a standardized form of conditionality or “partnership”, albeit described in terms of country ownership of (or sign-up to) the MDGs. Without a structural analysis

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International development agencies have not simply absorbed and rendered anodyne language that was once associated with a radical agenda; multiple usages may co-exist or compete within a single institution. Nevertheless, the evolution of meanings conferred on specific terms by such powerful institutions serves to obfuscate rather than enlighten. In this respect, the UNRISD research programme on popular participation, which was carried out from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, stands out for its clarity in defining this as being fundamentally about the redistribution of power through the agency of organized groups and movements. Political concepts shape the articulation of policy alternatives, and hence the language in which they are expressed matters and should be carefully used.

During the discussions that followed this presentation, Guy Standing deplored the unrigorous use of language in the field of development, suggesting that this both inhibits more serious analysis and serves to deflect criticism of the underlying paradigm by promoting a false consensus. This is not a question of linguistic niceties, but has real policy implications. One such example is the way in which the crisis in education is presented in policy terms as a need to get more children into school in order to increase their chances of good employment.

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Another is the way in which potentially subversive ideas are neutered as they enter the mainstream, for instance the move from the concept of work back to that of labour, and from there to decent employment and finally decent jobs. As the terms have shifted, so the vision becomes more conservative. The language of consensus takes conflict out of the equation, suggest-

ing that development can take place without power struggles. What is required, however, is the political courage and intellectual integrity to take issue with the language of false consensus. Gita Sen observed that it is to be expected that ideas that challenge the status quo will be co-opted; the challenge is how to ensure that such concepts retain their “bite”, and that it is possible to fight the opposition on the ground of one’s choosing. From an activist perspective, this raises the issue of whether the struggle is about concepts as such, or about who adopts them and how one should then respond. Desmond McNeill agreed that the price of obtaining institutional backing for ideas is that they then lose their analytical and political edge. Judith Richter suggested that the UN has adopted aspects of a corporate model that tends to squeeze out any competing discourses and visions.

The Intellectual Contribution of the United Nations

While several of the UN specialized agencies have or are currently writing their intellectual histories, and the BWIs have long invested significant resources in such endeavours, there exists no comprehensive history of the UN, either institutional or intellectual. Through the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHIP), an attempt is under way to correct this situation. Louis Emmerij summarized the objectives and preliminary findings of UNIHIP, which he and his colleagues, Sir Richard Jolly and Thomas Weiss, have been coordinating since 1999. UNIHIP seeks to analyse the role of the UN as an intellectual actor, explaining the origins of particular ideas, tracing their trajectories, and evaluating their impact on policy and action. Four major questions arise in charting this history: First, do ideas shape policy, or does a policy challenge call existing ideas forward and perhaps generate new ones? Second, do ideas arise and exist in particular historical and social contexts, or do they have a life of their own? Third, because a given idea is seldom totally new, at what point in its varied forms should one begin to study an idea, and how can it then be attributed? And finally, how can one document the influence of ideas as opposed to the individuals or agencies that put them forward? While UNIHIP has sought to understand the past, for example through collecting the oral histories of some 75 individuals with significant experience at different levels in the UN, this is a forward-looking history in that it attempts to draw lessons for the future.

Ideas that have mattered since the UN's foundation range from the specific to the more sweeping, from the normative (such as the call for eliminating all forms of discrimination against women) to the causal (such as the target of 0.7 per cent of gross national product to be contributed as official development assistance). The UN has made enormous contributions to development theory and practice in the fields of economic development and global income distribution, employment, the informal economy and basic needs, particularly during the 1970s. The various studies making up UNIHP include the struggle between the Group of 77 and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries over the role of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development; the gradualist approach to transition in the economies of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union recommended by the Economic Commission for Europe over the hugely damaging "big bang" approach favoured by the BWIs; and the leadership shown by ECLAC in developing policy ideas such as the centre-periphery framework, import-substitution policies and dependency analysis. In the 1980s, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) took the lead in critiquing the social costs of structural adjustment in its book, *Adjustment with a Human Face*. In the 1990s, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) launched its annual *Human Development Report*, challenging the intellectual supremacy of the World Bank by developing new statistical measures of human and social well-being, such as the Human Development Index and the Gender-Related Development Index.

Findings and policy recommendations emerging from UNIHP include the following. First, overall, the UN has had a more pioneering record in the economic and social arena than is generally realized, particularly in its early years, which were marked by creativity and enthusiasm. The current imbalance in funding away from the UN and to the BWIs should therefore be corrected. Second, neoliberal economic orthodoxy remains the driving force for the PRSPs and for actions in pursuit of the MDGs. This approach is too narrow to achieve the MDGs and greater attention should be given to the UN's multidisciplinary approaches. Third, the UN's most important intellectual contributions have come from different agencies and institutions characterized by bold vision and leadership, multidisciplinary and pragmatic analysis of the highest calibre, attention to country-level specifics, freedom from tight government or bureaucratic control, and strong commitment to jus-

tice. Finally, autonomous public research institutes within the UN, such as the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) and UNRISD, are particularly valuable not only in terms of the actual work they undertake, but also because their ways of working hold out the hope for reigniting the creative intellectual spark of the UN in the economic and social spheres.

In commenting on the contribution of the UN to ideas and policies, Deepak Nayar pointed out that for some 25 years, the Cold War constrained its scope for political action, while the North-South divide limited what it could do in terms of reshaping the global economy. Its greatest intellectual influence was exerted from the time of its founding until the 1970s; with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the emergence of a unipolar system, the role and relevance of the UN has declined. Marginalized from the main policy making arenas of the BWIs, the UN has responded to the age of markets and globalization with blurred ideas. Its revival has

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been in relatively uncontested areas, while one of its major contributions has been to provide a sounding board in the form of world summits. Retrospectively, it appears that the UN has been most important as an intellectual actor when it has been in harmony with the dominant ideology of the times, but that it has been unable to sustain this leadership in the face of competition. UN research is not, therefore, sufficiently critical and independent; too much of it is subcontracted, and there is little synergy between in-house and external talent. The BWIs have the upper hand, in that they both conduct much of their research in-house and internalize it. The UN must revive the belief in the value

of pluralism in ideas, recognizing that doubt is as important as what is thought to be knowledge, and that asking the right questions is perhaps as important as producing the right answers. Knowledge develops at the intersection of knowledge systems; this implies a commitment to proactive, pluralistic thinking and rethinking within a multidisciplinary framework. Martin Khor Kok Peng and Enrique Oteiza agreed that the intellectual vacuum left by the UN is being filled by the BWIs, which have the wherewithal to produce research that has the hallmarks of quality, impact, relevance and outreach. The irony is that the UN, along with its specialized agencies, is under-funded while the well-funded World Bank is seeking to present itself as a “knowledge bank” with expertise in every area of development. José Antonio Ocampo underlined that the UN is no longer the major individual actor it was in the 1960s: since then, there has been significant growth in the number and capacity of other institutions. The resources of the Brazilian government’s institute for applied economics research, for example, outstrip those of ECLAC. The challenge is to reposition the regional commissions as key vehicles in developing a manageable world that is based on diversity. In the process, however, it is important not to lose coherence by being drawn into agendas set by various donors. Louis Emmerij argued that the UN had not been most influential when in harmony with the dominant ideology. Its major early contributions were both immensely varied, rather than corresponding to a single overarching paradigm, and were very often against the tide. That they have succeeded in entering the mainstream does not mean that this is where they began. In future, however, the UN should perhaps seek to be more of a catalyst than a leader.

The Potential and Limits of Knowledge Agencies

Kenneth King’s presentation examined the relationship between knowledge and policy by focusing on the example of education. In recent years, the international aid community, led by the UN and the World Bank, has whittled down the Education for All agenda of the 1990 conference in Jomtien, Thailand, into the MDG of universal primary education (UPE), with an emphasis on girls. The role that research played in this process is especially telling, given the self-definition of bilateral and multilateral donors as knowledge agen-

cies, and the World Bank as a knowledge bank. This discourse might suggest a linear course from country-specific research into educational needs feeding into general policy guidelines and context-related goals, all drawn up jointly by donor and recipient country governments. The actual process, however, owed as much to convictions and the appeal of tangible targets as to detailed research; and there is scant evidence of research from the South having played any part.

World Bank research long prior to Jomtien had focused on the economic benefits of UPE, and many NGOs then lined up behind what was to become a global agenda. Other educational needs—such as technical, higher or even non-formal education and adult literacy—became sidelined in the process. The policy recommendations to emerge from the series of world conferences in the 1990s were then further distilled by organizations such as the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) into quantifiable targets (although the DAC also stressed the need for a highly context-dependent approach).

The commitment to UPE was couched in terms of local ownership of a process that would be underwritten by external aid. This illustrates a major tension between the supposed self-reliance of countries and their obligations to meet the policies, strategies and targets set and paid for by donors. But what does it mean politically and in terms of sustainability for a country to reach an MDG target if this achievement is 60 per cent dependent on aid? Similarly, the “consensus” across the UN system, the BWIs and the OECD concerning such targets did not emerge from the South, nor do the targets themselves give any place to Southern knowledge economies or knowledge societies: the emphasis is entirely on reducing Southern knowledge deficits.

The new orthodoxy is that aid should adopt a sector-wide approach in order to overcome the evident disadvantages associated with multiple projects. However, in countries whose national policy terrain has been eroded by a combination of low salaries, brain drain and decades of orientation to donor policies, the sector-wide approach may displace national planning activity, and so be still more invasive than earlier modalities. It may be tentatively concluded that the conjunction of a global aid agenda with new ways to deliver aid has actually increased dependency. Further, some of the 71 countries judged to be at risk of missing one or more of the MDGs may be inclined to ac-

cept greater dependency or indebtedness in order to reap the supposed benefits of being “on target”.

The location of these new modalities within donor agencies that claim to be undergoing a knowledge revolution is curious. Much of their thinking on knowledge management was imported from the corporate sector, whose interest in tapping employees’ expertise forms part of an individual company’s comparative international advantage. In reality, knowledge management within organizations such as the World Bank and the United Kingdom Department for International Development has been more concerned with sharing knowledge internally (through the better use of information and communication technologies, for instance) and disseminating this rather than generating new knowledge. The danger is that donor agencies become even more certain about what they think they already know, rather than open to learning from new ideas or different sources. Their focus on validating and disseminating their own knowledge may render such agencies still less receptive to knowledge from the South. The inattention to higher education and to the maintenance of national research capacity in the South, both in the MDGs and in the recent revival of the concept of capacity building, suggests that increased support to knowledge development in the South is not part of the global development agenda.

While focusing on the World Bank, John Toye emphasized that the production of social knowledge in all international institutions is problematic, because of their nature as a form of public bureaucracy. The quality of research cannot be inferred simply on the basis of the positive or negative impacts that an institution’s policies are thought to have. Increasingly, the production of social knowledge, rather than collection and dissemination, or support for other bodies to produce it, has become the preserve of the state at the national level, and of intergovernmental organizations in the international arena. In this sense, public institutions such as the World Bank aspire to be intellectual actors rather than merely investors in the production of knowledge. The World Bank’s stated reasons are both to ensure control over the research in question, and to guarantee in-house ownership of the resulting work. There are drawbacks, however. A modified Weberian theory of bureaucracy asserts that, inside all public organizations, there is a tension between authority and power. Within intergovernmental organizations, the multitude of competing country interests—including the requirements of

geographical balance in recruitment—tend to weaken the congruence of power with authority and to deplete the armoury of sanctions that high-level officials can deploy in the event of insubordinate or dysfunctional behaviour. In-house researchers run a high risk of becoming “defiant” bureaucrats in that their methods and findings may not accord with the institution’s persuasive purposes. More subtly, the organization may defend its core doctrines by designing a research agenda that is likely to do this, and marginalizing or ignoring topics that may be antagonistic to the appearance of consensus. The intellectual integrity of in-house researchers may, therefore, be compromised by the need to conform to organizational expectations.

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Egregious cases of the World Bank’s stifling unwelcome research recommendations range from Jan Tinbergen’s support for a mixed private and public economy in 1955, to Joseph Stiglitz’s arguments for moving away from the narrowest version of neoliberalism in the late 1990s. The ability of the World Bank to be a creative intellectual actor, in the sense of encouraging and promoting new ideas, is therefore far less than its power to propagate its own views. By contrast, in its earlier years, the UN allowed its economic researchers considerable freedom. Some of the liveliest thinking to emerge ran counter to the organization’s bureaucratic objectives. In this sense, the World Bank can be said to be a more functional bureaucracy, but relatively sterile in the field of political economy, while the creative energy emanating from the UN was in some measure due to its relative dysfunctionality in the Weberian sense.

The World Bank has made a prodigious investment in intellectual infrastructure following its renewed focus

since the late 1980s on poverty reduction alongside structural adjustment as a precondition for economic growth. Its research and published outputs are, perhaps, the most influential worldwide, though hardly the most innovative. They have helped to reinforce the intellectual rationale for economic policy reforms promoted by the bank itself and bilateral donors.

Since the 1990s, the World Bank's lending portfolio has expanded to include a wider development agenda, in particular the promotion of gender equality, popular participation, good governance, a strong civil society and environmental conservation. Loans have continued to be premised upon limiting the role of the state, but process conditionality (for example, through PRSPs) has to some extent replaced its policy-based predecessor. The World Bank's greater direct involvement in development issues exposes it to NGO criticism that it is in breach of its own guidelines, for instance in relation to environmental damage, or that its consultation processes are inadequate. Better accountability mechanisms have, however, had the perverse effect of making the World Bank more answerable to US politicians than to their counterparts in borrowing countries. Under the presidency of James Wolfensohn, the bank has sought to accommodate and pre-empt NGO critiques on issues such as debt relief and is currently researching how and under what conditions pro-poor growth can translate into access to well-functioning social services. This responds to both the pro-poor agenda promoted by NGOs and in-house research calling for more selective conditionality. It remains to be seen how far the results of this research will influence policy should they run counter to the assumptions underpinning the bank's wider agenda. Paradoxically, the risk is that the World Bank's greater

and silences or elides others in the interest of creating the appearance of consensus. Alternatives will be found in the intersections between, for instance, intellectuals and popular movements, rather than within formal institutional settings. Rehman Sobhan noted that when intellectuals become "colonized", their research becomes an instrument with which to validate the views of the commissioning body. Shalmali Guttal echoed this comment, referring to a "revolving door" whereby some large NGOs as well as academics move with relative ease into the World Bank through secondments or consultancies. Adrian Atkinson argued that to focus on BWIs is to obscure the decisive role of the corporate sector in shaping contemporary institutions and in defining development. It is therefore not enough to undertake good-quality research; what is needed is to study the issues that most matter at a juncture in which capitalism needs markets more than it needs labour.

Jomo K.S. agreed that international public institutions such as the World Bank enjoy a degree of autonomy from their principles, not least because of the multiplicity of principles involved. However, this alone cannot explain the differences among the BWIs and the World Trade Organization, particularly given the ostensibly more democratic governance arrangements of the latter compared with the "one dollar one vote" principle governing the BWIs. Despite the appearance of research-based policy recommendations emanating from the BWIs, the role of ideas as such has been rather modest. This might best be explained by the Gramscian notion of hegemony or the uncritical acceptance of certain seemingly legitimate, dominant ideas, in contrast to the Bank's advocacy of competition in economic matters — presumably including ideas. It would be useful to examine the changing financing of economic development

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