UNRISD United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

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Improving Knowledge on Social Development in International Organizations

Report of the UNRISD Seminar
7–8 November 2000, Bellagio, Italy

Institutions in the United Nations system play a central role in research on development. They are responsible for analysing and publishing much of the basic international data on the evolution of the world economy and society: population data; health and education statistics; figures on economic growth, income distribution and employment; industrial and agricultural development; changes in trade, debt and international financial flows. Responding to the needs of the General Assembly and other international decision-making bodies, these institutions produce reports on issues ranging from technology policy to the problems of ageing. In response to requests from governments, they offer analysis and advice tailored to deal with specific problems at national or regional levels. Moreover, United Nations organizations that have a mandate to defend and improve the conditions of certain groups, such as women and children, carry out specialized data gathering and research in their fields. A small number of research institutes organize networks of scholars around the world to engage in the comparative study of strategic global issues.

The important role of United Nations institutions in shaping the course of development thinking over the past 50 years is being explored in an unusual programme on the Intellectual History of the United Nations. The fact that the programme is in the process of producing some 14 commercially published volumes (dealing with such topics as development strategies, humanitarian affairs, indicators and statistics, and global resource management, among others) provides clear commentary on the breadth and depth of the United Nations contribution to global debates.

Nevertheless the leadership of the United Nations—not only in generating data and policy advice, but also in shaping the ideas and norms that must guide work in the field of world development—has been severely challenged during the past several decades. The Third World debt crisis of the early 1980s, followed by the collapse and restructuring of the Soviet bloc in the 1990s, greatly increased the strategic importance of international financial institutions in the development arena. Funds for research and policy advice increasingly flowed toward the latter, while the United Nations struggled to maintain its programmes in the face of long delays on the part of several major donors in meeting their financial obligations to the institution.

The relative weakening of the United Nations voice in the international development debate is unfortunate. The organization's mandate is far broader than that of the international financial institutions and its consultative capacity far more developed. It has a clear responsibility to promote the goals of peace, development and social justice laid out in the United Nations Charter. Furthermore, it has the obligation to do so through dialogue, and to provide its members with the kind of analy-

sis and information they need in order to participate effectively in debate on global issues.

The UNRISD Seminar

Early in 2000, UNRISD proposed a stocktaking exercise, with a view toward reinforcing the collective capacity of United Nations agencies to influence the development agenda. A dozen or more high-level United Nations officials, concerned with research on social development, would be invited to exchange views, in an informal atmosphere, on the current research programmes of key United Nations agencies, and to consider how these efforts were contributing to improvement in general understanding of important development issues. If participants so desired, the group could then go on to define a few areas in which all felt more work could usefully be done. Papers might be commissioned from outstanding thinkers on these issues and plans made for a series of future seminars, which could provide an opportunity for further refinement of a common position or approach, or for strengthening an alternative research agenda.

The Rockefeller Foundation graciously offered to make its Bellagio Study and Conference Center available for this purpose. The seminar was held on 7–8 November 2000, with conversations continuing informally on the following day. Participants came from the ILO, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNESCO, UNHCHR, UNIFEM, UNRISD, WHO, the United Nations Secretariat (Division for Social Policy and Development), and four Regional Economic Commissions (ECA, ECLAC, ESCAP and ESCWA).

It was a congenial group, and one with wide-ranging interests. Participants are responsible for research on a broad cross-section of issues within the competence of the United Nations: world economic and social trends, employment and labour markets, human rights, health, education, poverty alleviation, trade and technology policy, assistance to least developed countries, and gender equity. Some are also experts on regional development issues; and in fact, the Bellagio seminar provided the social affairs officers of the regional commissions for Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific, and the Middle East with their first opportunity to meet informally with counterparts from all other commissions in the developing world.

Each participant prepared a 5–10 page briefing paper, highlighting major research efforts of his or her institution and suggesting topics for discussion at the seminar. During the weeks preceding the meeting, these briefing papers were circulated among all members of the group. They were also integrated by the seminar organizers at UNRISD into a summary analysis of some current themes in United Nations research on social development. The purpose of the exercise was to establish common ground and to facilitate the work of the seminar. The summary of current research areas, provided to participants in advance, made it unnecessary to begin the meeting with preliminary explanations of each agency's work—a procedure that is notoriously time consuming and can easily degenerate into official statements of agency positions.

Discussions in Bellagio were entirely open-ended and substantive, drawing on each person's knowledge and convictions in the development field. Sessions were led by facilitators chosen from the group, and on the first day were structured around a series of very general questions.

- What are our common concerns? What do we stand for? Do we have a common underlying approach? How important are regional differences?
- What are the conceptual weaknesses of United Nations research on social development? Does United Nations work uncritically incorporate concepts that are in vogue, or does it question these concepts? Are we moving, or can we move, toward changing the terms of the current debate on development?
- What are the empirical weaknesses of United Nations research on social development? What data are most urgently needed, and how can they be generated? Can we improve the statistical underpinning of United Nations work?
- What themes most urgently require additional research? Where can our joint efforts make a difference?

By the end of the day, the participants had agreed on a series of issues requiring further analysis. The second day of the meeting was devoted to developing two concrete proposals for future seminars.

Session One:
Common Values and Concerns

The discussion began with reaffirmation of the common values underlying research on social development issues in all United Nations agencies. Every one of these institutions—and every United Nations official—has an explicit commitment to the principles of the United Nations Charter. Working at the level of these principles is our job.

If further emphasis on this point were needed, John Langmore added, it could be drawn from the declarations of principle and programmes of action of recent world conferences. The declaration of the Millennium Assembly, held in New York in late 2000, contains an especially strong call for all members of the world community to uphold the principles of human dignity and equality at the global level. Like the World Summit for Social Development in 1995, the Millennium Assembly challenged the United Nations to respond effectively to growing poverty, inequality and social conflict in many parts of the world. It reaffirmed the importance of the international body and renewed the United Nations mandate in the field of development.

Geneva 2000, the Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly held to review and facilitate implementation of the commitments made at the Social Summit, not only restated this mandate but also put forth a set of major initiatives on which the international community can work. Perhaps the most important of these is concerned with innovative ways of generating public and private funding for social development—a question to be explored at the United Nations Conference on Financing for Development in 2002. The decision by the international community to carry out this review in the context of the United Nations system—rather than in the restricted context of the Bretton Woods institutions—is a significant step toward broadening global public management of the international system.

The tone of these meetings and others taking place during the past few years reflects a new willingness on the part of member states to challenge some central tenets of the free-market mindset that has shaped international policy since the 1980s. People are searching for a more even path to development. This, as several participants noted, creates new opportunities for dialogue, not available for well over a decade.

The evolving international context thus made the Bellagio meeting especially timely, and the theme that members of the seminar were most concerned to see reintroduced into a broadened development debate was social justice. That was the overarching concept within which many more specific concerns of the participants fit: eradicating poverty; promoting gender equality; reversing extreme maldistribution of income; and rebuilding crumbling social services. Nevertheless the statement of goals and principles is obviously not enough. While the norm-setting function of the United Nations is a vital element in international co-operation, the task of all agencies represented at the meeting—and, even more specifically, of their research—is to help governments and citizens operationalize the common goals of the system. The challenge is to establish links between aims and means, and to help people (both within the system and outside it) consider the advantages and disadvantages of different possible courses of action.

At a certain level of generality, Thandika Mkandawire pointed out, even the means that should be employed to improve social conditions are spelled out in the United Nations Charter. For example, poverty reduction cannot be promoted through any means: in an extreme case, fascist poverty reduction would not be conscionable. What the world organization stands for is democratic, socially inclusive development. Therefore the element of empowerment is extremely important in the United Nations vision of promoting social progress. John Martin underlined the need for empowerment in his criticism of a great deal of work in the field of poverty alleviation. Quoting Amartya Sen, he noted that “we need agents, not patients”. The challenge is to turn poverty alleviation into development.

Liberalization and globalization enormously complicate the task of creating or defending the institutions that are essential components in the struggle for social progress. It is difficult for national governments to carry out effective development strategies, mobilizing domestic resources, when the international environment works against stable and equitable growth. Thus, early in the discussion, Eddie Lee defined the central problem of the seminar as “the implications of globalization for social justice”. Gloria Kan quickly seconded this position and noted that another primary concern must certainly be how to “revitalize the role of governments and the public sector in development”.

Nevertheless governments do not generally speak with one voice in the international system. The growing need to be present in a variety of global forums, for a variety of purposes, implies the likelihood of increasing incoherence in national policy. Thus, for example, governments make commitments in the field of social welfare or human rights that may be clearly undermined by other commitments they make in trade or financial negotiations. As a lawyer concerned with economic, social and cultural rights, Stefanie Grant observes this situation daily. Repeated clashes between international norms and conventions on social questions, on one hand, and the evolving international economic context, on the other, are symptomatic of the contradictions that plague the current global order.

The primary task of research departments and institutes in the United Nations system is to document such contradictions (as well as other critical problems of contemporary world development), to analyse them and to help governments and citizens think them through. Why do these problems exist? What are alternative ways of dealing with them? And what are the possible advantages and disadvantages of different courses of action? After drawing attention to some of the critical problems of contemporary development during the first half of the session, participants began in the second half to exchange views on areas needing new approaches to research.

First, it is necessary to be explicit about the constituency for whom we work—the audience to whom we speak in reports and newsletters and Web sites and books. This varies enormously, from United Nations colleagues (attempting to design adequate policies), to member states, citizens' groups and the public at large. Joanne Sandler suggested that we not forget the far-flung field staff of United Nations agencies, many of whom are relatively isolated. They need good information to support their positions and to help build local constituencies where they may be non-existent. Dissemination is often not as effective as it should be in such cases.

An important potential audience, Lee added, is the large group of people in the international development community who are not particularly interested in questions of social justice, or who give them low priority. Some may simply suspect that no action in this area is necessary, since market forces will ultimately work to the benefit of all. An effective advocacy strategy is necessary to reach this group—if, indeed, it is possible to do so at all. The question of how to change mindsets and build consensus emerged again during later sessions of the seminar.

It is safe to say that the largest and most important constituency for United Nations research shares most of the basic values of the world organization. What kinds of research does this constituency need? For signatories of United Nations conventions and programmes of action, it is important to provide data and analysis that facilitate compliance with commitments and norms. This is a specific field in which some agencies, such as the ILO, have a long tradition. But for institutions like the UNHCHR, the situation is much more complex. Governments and civil society organizations need help in obtaining rigorous, impartial analysis of diffuse and highly complicated social phenomena. "Impact studies" are particularly necessary, to illustrate the effects of structural adjustment programmes on various groups or the repercussions of specific kinds of international economic policy on certain people's life chances.

For citizens working to further the goals of the United Nations Charter, or to improve the quality of their government's contribution within the international system, still other studies would seem essential. For example, in addition to careful empirical analysis of how various policies affect welfare and well-being—which focuses on understanding the past—they should have access to prospective studies that lay out alternatives for the future. Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara called this "what would it take" research. Given commitment to a particular goal or policy, like provision of a minimum citizen's income to every member of society, what would it take to accomplish this end? Analysis of the efforts of others, the problems they face and the methods they choose to overcome them, is essential in such work. So is the presentation of the best possible technical advice.

Citizens' groups can also learn a great deal from studies of how particular issues eventually find their way onto the agenda of national decision-making bodies and international organizations. Kan suggested, on the basis of her experience in the United Nations Secretariat in New York, that particularly important lessons are to be learned from initiatives that fail. The politics and practice of agenda setting are clearly central elements in the determination of global policy.

Most kinds of research mentioned above imply moving closer to local situations while keeping the global context in mind; and as members of the seminar noted repeatedly, the United Nations regional commissions occupy a particularly strategic place in this kind of thinking. In global debates not tempered by concrete experience—whether in the General Assembly or in the development advice dispatched by international financial institutions—there is a tendency to reduce almost everything to the lowest common denominator. But the regional commissions are able, at least to some degree, to escape this conundrum. It is therefore important to incorporate the insights of these regional bodies more effectively into the research of agencies with a more comprehensive mandate.

At the same time, more co-ordination among the regional commissions is clearly necessary. As Kim-Lan Lim noted, these institutions have much to learn from each other; and their social development divisions, in particular, can provide each other with extremely useful analysis of local experiences.

Another way to move closer to local situations—to reflect reality more effectively—is to involve local researchers more systematically in United Nations-sponsored research. In many cases, hiring foreign consultants to document and explain local situations is a far less adequate strategy than relying on social scientists from the countries involved. Furthermore, it is extremely important to encourage the kinds of research that draw on the insights and experience of the public at large. As Sandler noted, the United Nations has a responsibility to give voice to groups that do not yet have it. This requires developing an approach that is far less technocratic and elitist than the one currently orienting many international research efforts—even, it might be added, when some of these make constant reference to their "participatory" character.

Strengthening research on social development in the United Nations system also requires making better use of resources and minds outside the United Nations system. As Charles Gore noted, researchers in the United Nations tend to be closer than academics to the policy process. This gives them access to information that may take longer to reach the academic world and raises important questions that colleagues in a university environment may not see. At the same time, however, United Nations staff often suffer from insufficient contact with broader currents of thinking in universities.

The United Nations does channel considerable resources toward academic consultants, and in some cases (like UNESCO support for the International Social Science Council) it finances large disciplinary networks. Nevertheless it seems only partially successful in refocusing these efforts on issues of importance to the United Nations. To narrow the gap between academic research and policy making, United Nations programmes need to invest more money and staff time in establishing critical links with the academic community.

Session Two: The Context of Ideas

Research on social development today takes place in a specific context of ideas, institutions and resource use. Although this context is often taken for granted—since it has, after all, become a relatively normal state of affairs—this is a mistake. Unless there is clear awareness of the limits imposed by the current situation, it will be impossible to move beyond it.

The second session of the seminar began with a discussion of liberalization and globalization. The faith in unregulated markets that stands behind this predominant mindset has shaped policies and moulded institutions for over 20 years. Its influence is felt not only in falling barriers to the movement of goods, services and capital across national borders, but also in a systematic reduction of the role of the state in promoting national economic development and providing social services to citizens.

There is a strand of intolerance in this mindset—a sense of infallibility that forecloses questioning and restricts debate. Yet the development record of the past few decades—like the development record of any other period—merits serious analysis. Its accomplishments in terms of growth, poverty reduction and equity have not been good. One contribution of research on development, both within the United Nations system and outside it, must certainly be to problematize this experience: to raise relevant questions about specific policies, to explore alternatives.

One way to begin this process is to review some of the largely unexamined suppositions that underlie current development thinking. For example, while there is widespread discussion of weaknesses in public sector governance, it is surprising how seldom one hears reference

to market failure. The inability of markets to deal with a number of critical economic and social problems is one of the first axioms taught in any introductory course on economics. Unless adequate conditions are created by governments or communities acting outside the market context, markets may promote neither efficiency nor equity. On the contrary, they may narrow competition and promote concentration of resources in a few hands.

Good research can help governments manage markets better, so that they are a bit less inequitable and a bit less inefficient. It can also encourage policy makers and citizens to discard simplistic arguments about "trade-offs". A new generation of economists and government officials has been trained to think in sharp dichotomies: if you want outcome A, you cannot have outcome B. Frequent reference is made, for example, to an inherent conflict between efficiency and equity. But these two goals are not necessarily in conflict. In fact, there is increasing evidence that better income distribution leads to higher growth. And so it is with other apparent dichotomies, which may better be thought of as extremes on a continuum containing many possible combinations of goals and means. Again, it should be the task of development research to broaden the range of possibilities in concrete situations.

A number of other concepts that shape current development policy should also be questioned. Members of the seminar took up the idea of "targeting" and gave some attention to the kinds of social and political relations this implies. In the course of this discussion, the futility of adopting an ideological position on targeting became clear. This policy option should be considered in conjunction with others—not as the only acceptable procedure for distributing social-sector resources, but as one possible approach in an array of policy instruments that have as their overall function the improvement of social welfare. Whether targeting is necessary in specific situations is a question open to investigation, analysis and debate—hopefully involving those whose livelihoods will be affected.

"Pro-poor" is another generally used term that requires greater clarity. Martin noted that pro-poor health policy is usually considered to involve nothing more than providing for child and maternal health. The idea often presupposes minimalist solutions, even in these areas. Nevertheless if the breadwinner of a family falls sick, is disabled or dies, it can be catastrophic, even for families that have not been living in poverty. In a number of situations, it implies destitution for survivors and/or dependents. Is it logical, then, to suppose that pro-poor health policy can be based only on narrowly targeted programmes, while ignoring the importance of universal social provision in preventing poverty and ensuring minimum levels of health?

Mkandawire carried the discussion further, pointing out that concepts like "targeting" or "pro-poor" are built on suppositions about the institutional setting in which policy makers work. When these suppositions are not made explicit, there can be considerable confusion. For example, targeting requires a strong and efficient public sector; but in the Third World this approach to social policy is in fact most often associated with other policies that systematically weaken national governments. Or, to give another indication of the confusion that reigns in the predominant development paradigm, free-market thinkers have consistently argued against targeted industrial policy in Africa, Asia or Latin America on the grounds that governments do not have the capacity to channel resources efficiently toward the most strategic sectors or firms. Targeting in this case is said to promote cronyism and corruption. How, then, are the same governments to be efficient and uncorrupt in targeting social expenditures?

In further commentary on the relevance of some of the most frequently used concepts in the present-day development arena, Akil Akil pointed out the difficulty encountered by many non-Western researchers and policy makers when attempting to make sense of terminology in foreign languages. Two examples are "gender" and "governance", which are virtually impossible to translate into Arabic. They embody an array of values and meanings that are not immediately clear. The same could be said for barriers to comprehension in a large number of other languages. Both Akil and Lim urged participants to keep cultural differences more clearly in mind during the discussion.

As Kan said, it is precisely the range of cultural understandings and lack of international consensus on development policies—the lack of a common way of thinking about development—that makes the United Nations so important. When discussions continue over months and years, some small narrowing of differences is possible. At Geneva 2000, agreement was reached on the utility

of studying the implications of a tax on speculative international capital flows. This step had seemed impossible only a year before.

Another incremental advance in the debate on global economic governance has come through United Nations work on the concept of global public goods. This concept draws on liberal economic thinking, in which there has always been a role for governmental action in situations of general public need. This principle is then extended to cover an array of pressing global problems, including financial instability, environmental degradation and deteriorating public health. The global public goods argument can be understood by those who speak in the language of markets, but its intention is to strengthen collective action. It represents a creative attempt to build consensus across deep ideological divides.

There is much additional work to do, both within each agency and collectively, if we hope to improve the framework of ideas that conditions possibilities for world development. In the meantime, unanalysed assumptions in the neoliberal worldview will continue to constrain the options available to large numbers of people. One example given toward the end of the session drives home the seriousness of the current situation. Developing countries' conditions of access to credit markets are determined by their credit ratings; and the latter are set by the employees of private companies, who base their judgements on a series of highly subjective criteria. Their view of the world (shaped by neoliberal training) leads them to assume that there is necessarily an inverse relation between social spending and fiscal responsibility. Therefore when governments begin to destine a larger part of their budgets to social sectors, there is a danger that credit ratings will drop. Yet growing social spending has no automatic relation to questionable economic policies.

Perhaps more damaging than the assumptions made by credit evaluators is the gradual absorption of faulty economic logic into the day-to-day activities of governments that are heavily dependent on international finance (whether in the form of loans or private capital flows). In a large number of cases, liberalization, privatization, tight restrictions on social spending and other elements of advice received from creditors are simply accepted without question. They are a way of life, an element of received wisdom; and the fact that different policies might produce more efficient and equitable outcomes is not even considered.

Session Three: Data Gathering and Analysis

The availability and quality of relevant data is an important issue when discussing new directions in social development research. Is good information available in various areas? If not, can it be generated? Who generates it, and how is it used? What kind of information is essential to support innovative studies and to make convincing arguments for various alternative positions?

Participants in the seminar began by noting that there are serious problems with the data published by United Nations agencies, and with those regularly processed and used by the World Bank, the OECD and others in the development community. Usually, the raw data utilized by all these international organizations are provided by national governments. The statistics concerned may be of widely varying quality. Different agencies and banks employ different methods to correct and standardize the figures they receive; and then they trade information among themselves. The result can be little short of chaotic.

Economic crisis and the constant pressure to cut government expenditure in many developing countries makes data gathering even more haphazard. The budgets of statistical offices have been slashed and personnel reduced. As these offices become increasingly dependent on foreign support for their operations, normal data-gathering operations may be put off or abandoned in order to accommodate the special needs of funders. The World Bank is especially well known for paying large sums to ensure that its data need receives priority over others'. Then, ironically, the resulting data may be easier for local people to find on agency Web sites, or in glossy international publications, than in documents put out by their own national authorities.

The shrinking capacity of public institutions to generate national statistics is also reflected—not only in developing countries, but also in some developed ones—in a tendency to subcontract some gathering functions to private consulting companies. This information—or analysis based on it—may be sold at a high price, thus excluding many members of the public.

Participants in the seminar spent some time reviewing these problems, and commenting on significant efforts being made by donors and co-ordinating bodies (such as the United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination and the OECD/DFID Paris 21 initiative) to improve the situation. In particular, as Nadia Auriat noted, the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, to be located in Montreal, represents an important effort by the United Nations and the World Bank to improve what many would describe as the abysmal state of worldwide data on education. Yet, while this may offer hope for the future, the situation grows more critical in many areas. For example, the ability of national governments and the international community to provide an accurate picture of trends in health, morbidity and mortality seems to be declining—partly as a concomitant of crumbling public health services across large areas of the world.

The first use of improved social and economic statistics must be to strengthen the factual basis for national policy making. At the international level, however, access to good statistical series is also essential for monitoring compliance with existing United Nations commitments and judging the direction of social and economic change. Here one finds another kind of incoherence: United Nations statistics are not always presented in ways that allow monitoring of United Nations agreements. Thus Grant pointed out that any effort to improve monitoring requires not only generating more reliable data for existing social indicators, but also adapting some of the latter so that they become congruent with the needs of particular agencies and treaty bodies. To give one example, United Nations statistics, when disaggregated by age, generally have a different definition of "children" from that set out in the Convention

thinking on data and indicators should aim at least in part to reverse that state of affairs. How can we make visible some of the strategic problems of contemporary development that tend, even today, to remain largely invisible? For Gore, one immediate step in that direction is to support new forms of national income accounting that illustrate issues of gender equity.

Langmore called attention to the fact that despite the overwhelming importance of liberalization and globalization in shaping the development context, data on many critical financial questions are not collected by public institutions, including the IMF. For example, there is no record of the daily turnover of currency, nor are the operations of hedge funds monitored. Although there is an urgent need for accurate international financial data, both governments and international organizations seem afraid to demand that they be made available. Similarly, Gore noted, measuring trade liberalization is a huge area of controversy. It is extremely difficult to capture changing policies in a way that can be compared. As in the case of some other basic social and economic information, a great deal of strategic international economic data are gathered and analysed by private firms, and never find their way into the public domain.

Defining and measuring poverty has become another area of significant concern for the international community—now attempting to expose elements of the problem that might have been only partially visible before. In fact, there has been an effort within the United Nations system to gain agreement on a common minimum set of core indicators that can serve as a benchmark for progress. But this initiative is opposed by many countries, who refuse to be judged by any common international standard.

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