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# The UN and Global Governance

## Do Ideas Alone Help?

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### Abstract

This article discusses the role of the UN in global governance. In the absence of a world government to determine codes of conduct and regulate relations between states, multilateral approaches are needed to solve global problems. The UN provides an institutional framework for policy formulation and decision making at the international level. However, policies need to be underpinned by ideas and norms and the intellectual history of the UN suggests that the organisation is the source of many ideas that have led to human progress. For example, the concept of human rights and ideas about social and economic development and environmental sustainability have guided the UN's work in different countries. But there are gaps in global governance including normative, policy, institutional and compliance gaps that together with a deficiency of resources could undermine the global effort to implement the UN's ideas for creating a more peaceful and just world.

### Keywords

United Nations, global governance, ideas, human rights, development, multilateralism

### Introduction

The international community has always acknowledged the importance of global governance although the idea of a global government is resisted by states and markets. Political and economic crises, in different parts of the world, in recent years have also sharpened the debate about the need for better political and economic governance. The subject of this essay is the UN's role in global governance. Two of the four books reviewed belong to the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) series, while the collection edited by Weiss and Daws (2008) complements its endeavours. The fourth book by Thakur (2006) on peace and security has been included in this review because of its focus on international peace and security and the controversial issues the UN has been involved in, in recent years, such as the Iraq war, the use of force and the related issues of legality and legitimacy.

Jolly, Emmerij and Weiss (2009) write that an intellectual history should do at least four things: it should attempt to trace the origins of the ideas on which an organisation is based; it should examine the quality, validity and the timing of these ideas; it should identify missing ideas and ask why they are

missing; and finally it should suggest where ideas are needed and how the organisation should change to respond to ideas and give them a better chance of coming to fruition. As policy-making is one of the main functions of international organisations, they 'live or die by the quality and relevance of the policy ideas that they put forward and support' (Jolly et al. 2009, 1). Thus, the intellectual leadership provided by the UN is as important as the political leadership it was created to provide. The series focuses on economic and social development and the first book in the series, *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges* (2001), written by Jolly, Emmerij, and Weiss sets the tone. But because of the interrelations between development, security and human rights, the final volume (that is, *UN Ideas that Changed the World*) as well as some of the other books in the series include the political and security aspects of the UN's work in their discussions. There is some unavoidable overlap as all four books cover the same topics (for example, peace and security, human rights, development and environmental sustainability), but they have different insights to offer. The main aim of this review article is to examine the key arguments presented in these books, on the basis of which it suggests that although the UN is indeed the source of many ideas that have led to human progress, ideas alone may not be sufficient to govern the world.

## The Power of Ideas

Building on Inis Claude's notion of two UNs, the authors of all four books make a distinction between three UNs: the first UN consists of the main inter-governmental organs of the UN (Security Council, General Assembly and Economic and Social Council) and other UN bodies such as the specialised agencies; the second UN is identified as the staff of the UN Secretariat and other organisations within the UN system; and the third UN consists of non-state actors such as NGOs, academics, consultants, experts, independent commissions and other groups of individuals who routinely engage with the UN. Weiss and Thakur (2010) argue that

blue-ribbon international panels and commissions are a favoured UN mode of transmitting ideas into the norms, laws, and institutions of global governance. The Brandt, Palme, and Brundtland commissions; the Commissions on Global Governance; the Brahimi Panel on United Nations Peace Operations; the International Commission on Intervention and state sovereignty; and the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change are some of the most prominent milestones in the evolution of global governance since 1945. (Ibid., 77)

These three UNs play eight ideational roles such as providing a forum for debate; generating ideas; giving ideas international legitimacy; promoting the adoption of such ideas in policy-making; implementing or testing ideas and policies at the country level; generating resources to pursue new policies; monitoring progress; and burying ideas that seem 'inconvenient or excessively controversial' (Jolly et al. 2009, 35). The academic literature on the role of ideas is diverse and include the contributions of constructivists such as Alexander Wendt and John G. Ruggie and critical approaches such as those associated with Robert Cox. On the basis of Jolly et al.'s argument that 'ideas and concepts have clearly been a driving force in many areas of human progress' (2009, 39), their book is divided into nine chapters that discuss key UN ideas and initiatives, their evolution and how they have shaped policies. Thakur (2006), too, draws on constructivist theories on norms to argue that the UN provides an organisational platform

for norm advocacy, but argues that the Third World countries should be norm entrepreneurs and not be relegated to norm-takers, while Western developed countries are the norm-makers. Such a division will not lead to a viable world order.

### *Human Rights*

One of the reasons for the dichotomy mentioned earlier is the fact that most of the ideas and norms championed by the UN are rooted in Western liberalism. Indeed human progress seems to depend on the spread of Western liberal ideas. This seems to be the sub-text of *UN Ideas that Changed the World*, although the authors are also sympathetic to the aspirations and concerns of the developing countries. The first 'idea' discussed is human rights and the chapter on 'Human Rights for All' acknowledges the importance of the Universal Declaration of 1948 but attacks its implementation, especially by the major powers. It reminds us that there was a widespread repression in the Soviet Union and in the US, blacks still had no vote and segregation and racial discrimination were widespread. Additionally, it took 18 years for the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to be drafted and approved in 1966 and another decade for them to receive enough ratifications to come into force. The Third UN has played an important role in developing the concept of human rights and enshrining aspects of it in international law. An example is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which was adopted by the UN in 1981. But the UN has found that the sovereignty of states makes it difficult to protect and even monitor the human rights of its citizens. This issue is raised in all the four books.

In 2006, the much-criticised Commission on Human Rights was replaced by the Human Rights Council (UNHRC) that meets in the Palais des Nations, Geneva. On a visit to the Palais in July 2011, the present author and other members of her group were struck by the beautiful murals that decorated the hall. Spanish artist, Miquel Barcelo, was commissioned to create his 16,000-square-foot ceiling artwork at a cost of \$23 million. Critics alleged that some of the money had come from Spain's foreign aid budget. The establishment of the UNHRC is plagued by controversy. The US voted against this initiative and American critics argued that it would suffer from exactly the same problems as its predecessor, the UNCHR: too little power. But Jolly et al. and many other authors take exception to the policy of American 'exceptionalism', that is the US policy of staying out of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and not supporting the global consensus on many other important issues.

### *Gender and Women's Rights*

An area in which the UN's eight ideational roles have had an impact is that of gender and women's rights. The four global women's conferences held in Mexico, Copenhagen, Nairobi and Beijing between 1975 and 1995 did much to raise awareness, spread ideas, build confidence and create alliances. Around 32,000 non-governmental participants attended the Beijing conference. The Human Development Report, 1995, subtitled 'Gender and Human Development', was brought out by the UNDP as a contribution to the Beijing, 1995, women's conference. The chapter in *UN Ideas* on 'Gender: From eliminating discrimination to promoting women's rights and empowerment' draws extensively on Devaki Jain's

book entitled, *Women, Development and the UN: A Sixty-year Quest for Equality and Justice* (which is also part of the UNHIP series) and in which she notes that women's 'intellectual work constantly defined and redefined what equality meant for women and those who are unequally placed'. But she also accepts that the situation of women has not improved in many places. The chapter by Charlotte Bunch in Weiss and Daws (2008) summarises the contributions of the UN in this field. She highlights the issue of violence against women (VAW) and the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. However, the implementation of UN resolutions remains a challenge in most parts of the world.

### *Development*

Ideas about development have been discussed in a number of books in the UNHIP series. As development thinking was dominated by Western ideas in the early decades following the end of the World War II and the establishment of the UN, new ideas that addressed the concerns of the developing world were needed. In the 1970s, the concept of basic needs emerged. The ILO's strategy for meeting basic needs on a global scale, within a generation, combined an acceleration of economic growth in poor countries with redistribution of future increases of income. The work of UNRISD and the ILO were stepping-stones to a theory of human development that was elaborated by the UNDP in the 1990s under the leadership of Mahbub-ul-Haq in collaboration with Amartya Sen, while the work done by the UN Statistical Office and later the UNRISD to quantify the world paved the way for the Human Development Index.

The authors of *UN Ideas* also argue that goal-setting is one of the major UN contributions to national development in the last 50 years. While the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000 are the most recent of these goals, they do not challenge earlier notions of the need for accelerated growth in developing countries, but they add a clear focus on meeting the needs of people, especially women, children and the poor. Nor do they call the distribution of income within countries into question. The idea of 'development aid' was introduced by the UN in the 1950s and the first development decade was adopted in the 1960s. The UN also made a major contribution to the norm that rich countries should give 0.7 per cent of their GDP as official development assistance (ODA) to developing countries; the UN has also actively promoted the norm of corporate social responsibility through the Global Compact. Nevertheless the book notes that the Washington Consensus and the neoliberal economic and financial policies imposed by the IMF and the World Bank on developing countries were not helpful and neither is the donor community's policy of channelling increasing amounts of resources to and through them.

### *Environmental Sustainability*

But economic and social development go hand-in-hand with environmental sustainability, yet another concept that has developed due to the efforts of the three UNs. Around 17,000 non-governmental participants from across the planet attended the UN Conference on Environment and Development better known as the Rio Summit, in 1992. It took stock of progress since the Stockholm conference (1972) and linked environmental protection to poverty eradication, and emphasised priorities for the

least-developed and environmentally most vulnerable countries. Another achievement of the UN was the establishment of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as a result of the joint efforts of the WMO and the UNEP. Between 1988 and 2008, it issued four assessment reports. Chapter 9 of *UN Ideas* also discusses the Kyoto Protocol and the obstacles posed by various member states of the UN. The emergence of global issues, to which the third UN has contributed in no small measure, proves beyond doubt that international organisations are needed. States, on their own, cannot deal with these issues that require a collective effort on the part of the international community.

Similar arguments are presented in the collection of essays edited by Weiss and Daws. The handbook is over 700 pages long and is divided into eight parts and 40 chapters written by over 50 leading scholars and practitioners, representing mainly the second and third UNs. It is particularly useful for students and does not assume any prior knowledge of the UN. The handbook begins with a section on theoretical approaches to the study of international organisations/the UN (here again note the contributions of Martha Finnemore) and this is followed by a section on the principal organs such as the General Assembly, Security Council and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). In addition to the usual chapters on peacekeeping, humanitarian intervention and human security, there is a chapter by Ngaire Woods on the Bretton-Woods institutions, a chapter on the private sector by Craig Murphy and also chapters on civil society, women and gender, minorities and indigenous peoples and organised crime. As Ban Ki-moon points out in the foreword while each chapter represents the views of its authors, they all share a deep conviction that multilateral approaches are needed to solve global problems.

## The Politics of Global Governance

All the books reviewed have attempted to define global governance. According to Weiss and Thakur (2010, 6), global governance ‘refers to existing collective arrangements to solve problems’. It is ‘the sum of laws, norms, policies, and institutions that define, constitute, and mediate relations among citizens, society, markets, and the state in the international arena—the wielders and objects of international public power’ (ibid., 6). They add that even in the absence of an overarching central authority, existing collective arrangements bring more predictability, stability and order to transboundary problems than we might expect. Jolly et al. point out that in a number of technical areas global governance has demonstrated its value, for example, shipping, civil aviation and meteorology. Some of the more technical specialised agencies of the UN—the ITU, UPU and WMO—were created in the nineteenth century. However, as Ruggie points out in his foreword to Weiss and Thakur, international organisations remain anchored in the state system notwithstanding the expansion of issues on the global governance agenda, while Weiss and Daws argue that decision making in world politics and international organisations remains dominated by states. This point is taken further in Thakur’s works, especially on peace and security. In *The United Nations, Peace and security*, he writes that

the problematique of global security governance is the disconnect between the distribution of authority within existing international intergovernmental institutions, which is still fragmented and based on the assumption of a multipolar structure, and the international distribution of military power which is increasingly concentrated in just one pole. (Thakur, 2006, p. 3)

In Chapter 2, Thakur discusses US participation in UN peace operations, especially after the end of the Cold War, for example, in Somalia and the Balkans. He comes to the conclusion that there is a tension between unilateralism and multilateralism in US foreign policy which has bedevilled relations between the UN and the US. This leads to the discussion of the Iraq war in Chapter 10, 'Iraq's Challenge to World Order'. He concludes that the war's 'legality, legitimacy and impact on UN-US relations will be debated for years to come' (Thakur 2006, 223). The debate extends to the relevance/irrelevance of the UN in promoting respect for the principles of international law that would bring about a safer, better and more secure world. After all the UN was meant to be the framework within which members of the international community negotiated agreements on the rules of behaviour and the legal norms of proper conduct in order to preserve the society of states, in a Hedley Bull(ian) sense.

The volume by Weiss and Thakur provides the best analysis of the UN and global governance. Its aim is not merely to describe the collective arrangements to solve problems but to identify gaps in global governance. The five main gaps are knowledge gaps, normative gaps, policy gaps, institutional gaps and compliance gaps. All three UNs are engaged in the enterprise of increasing knowledge about new issues and problems and applying 'new' knowledge to 'old' problems. For example, while the international community needs to address the issue of global warming, scientific knowledge needs to form the basis of policy-making. Sometimes there is a danger of ideological positions impinging on methodological issues, especially in conducting research on the social world. Both the UN and civil society actors including universities, research institutes, think tanks and NGOs have a role to play in filling knowledge gaps. On the normative front, Weiss and Thakur argue that it is enormously difficult to reach a consensus about universally acceptable (and applicable) norms/ universal norms. Here too, civil society has a crucial role to play. The book mentions Raphael Lemkin's efforts to promote the adoption of the UN Genocide Convention; Henri Dunant and the Red Cross movement in the field of international humanitarian law; Peter Benenson and Amnesty International's pursuit of human rights; and Jody Williams' work on the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

The importance of ideas is emphasised both in filling normative and policy gaps. By policy is meant 'an interlinked set of governing principles and goals and the agreed programs of action to implement those principles and achieve those goals' (Weiss and Thakur 2010, 12). The Kyoto Protocol, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty are examples of policies designed to combat the threats of global warming and nuclear weapons. The absence of a policy on an emerging issue can lead to inaction, paving the way for a crisis. Moreover, policies need institutional backing. The authors write that 'if policy is to escape the trap of being ad hoc, episodic, judgmental, and idiosyncratic, it must be housed within an institution that has resources and autonomy' (ibid., 15). Finally, in the absence of a world government it is not always clear who has the authority, responsibility and capacity to ensure compliance, for example, how do we monitor the implementation records of states who have signed on to the Kyoto Protocol and the NPT? Compliance gaps raise the issues of implementation, monitoring and enforcement.

Weiss and Thakur apply their arguments about gaps in global governance to selected areas of the UN's work: the use of force (war, collective security and peace operations); arms control and disarmament; terrorism; trade, aid and finance; sustainable development; saving the environment (includes climate change); human rights; protecting against pandemics; and the new concept of the responsibility to protect (R2P). While some of these gaps are well known, for example, that the principle of collective

security on which the UN is based has not worked leading to policy adaptations and the practice of peacekeeping, others are a matter of opinion. For example, Weiss and Thakur argue that ‘the main policy gap in the arms control and disarmament regime is the lack of a nuclear weapons convention outlawing the possession and use of nuclear weapons by all actors’ (Weiss and Thakur 2010, 124). In any case, notwithstanding the importance of the three UNs, the first UN or member states are the political masters of the second UN and as a result the latter faces ‘enormous constraints in challenging orthodoxy’ (ibid.). In the authors’ opinion, the recommendations of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change appointed by the Secretary-General did not go far enough in this important area.

In any case, as Weiss and Thakur point out, in some areas of the UN’s work, it cannot impose its policies on its member states, never mind ensuring implementation and compliance, for example, in the field of development. The UN provides policy advice and technical assistance but has to rely on countries voluntarily adopting policies and goals such as the MDGs. The authors are also sensitive to the concerns of developing countries regarding encroachments on their sovereignty in setting economic policy. Similarly, the concept of sustainable development and environmental protection has given rise to tensions between developed and developing countries as the latter feared that the former’s preoccupation with the negative impacts of industrialisation threatened their economic aspirations.

## The Reform of the United Nations

Weiss and Daws have an entire section on the reform of the UN, while Thakur’s 2006 book has one chapter on it. However, they reflect quite different perspectives on this important issue. Thakur (2006) emphasises that after the World War II, leaders drew up rules to govern international behaviour and established a network of institutions for global governance for the common good. But both are now under serious challenge. He accepts that the world would have been a bloodier place without the UN but asserts that ‘the UN must persevere in its efforts to consolidate its strengths, fill in the gaps and eliminate wasteful habits and procedures’ (Thakur 2006, 319). As most of the authors point out, reform is an internal process and the UN itself has published many reports on it. For example, the Brahimi report on UN peace operations is quite well known and cited by many books on the UN as are the recommendations of the Report of the Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change.

One of the main issues Thakur’s chapter addresses is the issue of reforming the Security Council. He writes that ‘it suffers from a quadruple legitimacy deficit: performance, representational, procedural and accountability’ (ibid., 302). The problem is that while there are plenty of proposals for reforming the Security Council, there is no consensus on any of them. Edward C. Luck in Weiss and Daws discusses the reform of all the principal organs, arguing that reform efforts have ‘crashed into the hard shore of political realities and bureaucratic inertia’ (Luck 2008, 653). It is best seen as a process of adaptation to changing demands, needs and circumstances. The chapter by Laurent addresses the thorny issue of sharing the financial burden of the United Nations. Despite the fact that it is the wealthiest country in the world, the US has always been averse to paying 25 per cent of the UN’s budget. Moreover, the non-payment of dues by major contributors regularly creates problems for the organisation. The chapter also discusses alternative ways of financing UN operations and activities as does the following chapter by Chadwick Alger on ‘Widening participation’. Financing the work of the UN is one of the most important

obligations/responsibilities of its member states as is honouring the commitments that they make. The gaps in global governance outlined by Weiss and Thakur as well as a serious deficiency of resources could undermine the global effort to implement the UN's ideas for creating a more peaceful and just world.

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