

**Introduction: “International Organisations and the Politics of
Development: Historical Perspectives”**

Davide Rodogno (DR)

Sandrine Kott (SK)

DR

Dear participants, dear students, dear colleagues, dear members of international organizations, dear Irina; Sandrine and I wish you all a very good morning.

Before introducing the theme of this conference we would like to thank the sponsors that made this event possible. First and foremost, Sandrine and I would like to thank the Pierre Du Bois Foundation for its very generous support. We would like to thank the Graduate Institute and its director, Philippe Burrin, and the International History Department. We would like to thank the University of Geneva, the Faculté de Lettres, and the Département d’Histoire Générale, la Maison de l’Histoire et GSI. Last but not least, we would like to thank Felix Ohnmacht for all his hard work and Valérie Von Daeniken for her administrative support.

Without further ado we would like to say a few words on our conference, entitled:

**INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THE POLITICS OF
DEVELOPMENT: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

We see this conference as an exploratory meeting where—
together—we wish to test some ideas and approaches.

To put it in very simple terms, our ideas and approaches stem from two distinct areas of historical research: the history of international organizations and the history of development.

In the last ten years these two historiographical and research fields went through a considerable renewal and have remarkably expanded. It is our aim to combine these historiographies and research fields.

On the one hand, research and historiographies on development are interesting *per se*. We wish to question these studies through the prism of international organizations. On the other hand, the politics and practices of development reveal a number of things on international organizations' perceptions(!) of the world. They also draw our attention to the mechanics and dynamics of international organizations, including how these institutions interacted with various national and local actors and with further non-state actors.

I now turn the floor over to Sandrine.

SK

What do we mean by international organizations? And, why do we take them as a point of departure to study development?

First, we do not exclusively look at inter-governmental organizations, but as the program of the conference shows, we pay due attention to non-governmental organizations and philanthropic foundations.

Second, global governance is not the central question we address in this conference. International organizations are for us fields of historical enquiry. We see international organizations as platforms, spaces – sometimes porous sometimes impermeable – where visions, politics and practices of development were discussed, and expertise and know-how were circulated and produced.

As some of the papers will show, individual and collective actors have shaped these spaces with ideas and experience that came from specific national, local, and epistemic contexts. Thus, the fabrication of a given international organization's expertise or discourse in the field of development should be seen as the result of a complex and evolving balance of power. Therefore, this international organization's perspective allows us to discuss and interrogate the very notion of development.

Third, international organizations also played the role of hubs and bridges in which stakeholders brought in, took away or transferred ideas and experiences. International organizations allowed for the dissemination of expertise and know-how. In that regard they could exert a certain influence, we should bear in mind that international organization's influence had several limits. The necessity to adapt to local as well as international balances of power is one of them. But

their internal limits are equally important. Discrepancies and tensions existed between development discourses produced by international organizations and fieldwork conducted by these institutions' experts, like the discourse of generosity versus market-oriented practices.

Fourth, the production, circulation and dissemination of ideas and practices have drawn historians' attention to study international organizations seriously and critically. Undoubtedly the institutional framework greatly shapes the nature of these circulations and the constructions of discourses. At the same time, processes of appropriation and resistance took and still take place within these organizations, around and beyond them. They are one of the core-issues of this conference. In other words, institutional frameworks are a preliminary condition to understand how these processes are functioning. Understanding these frameworks is, however, not an end *per se*.

This perspective on the history of international organizations brought many participants of this conference to explore the highly controversial issue of "development", which has been a relevant and, since 1945, central activity of several international organizations. Through "development" international organizations viewed the world and spoke to the world. In the end, we could even say that development shaped international organizations, their agendas and the way they worked.

I will now give the floor to Davide who will expand on the meaning of development.

DR

Our starting point on the meaning of development is necessarily broad. International organizations or philanthropic foundations interpreted development differently and had different views on development practices. They also came from different secular and religious traditions. However, such heterogeneous panoply of meanings had common ideological denominators: in the discourse of all organizations development was related – in one way or another – to betterment, improvement, progress, modernization and, to some extent, well-being. We are fully aware that development encompassed, and still encompasses today, a core economic and financial dimension. However, several other dimensions stemming from social or humanitarian traditions have been equally important and equally present although – perhaps – less visible in the practices of development as conceived and implemented by international organizations. There is for example a labor-related set of concerns, such as manpower, training, social security, rehabilitation of disabled individuals, to name just a few of them that were debated at the ILO and gave rise to development programs. UNICEF, UNESCO or FAO put forward a different emphasis on development, related to education or nutrition. The WHO connected development to health in different ways: hygiene, sanitation, eradication of diseases and so on.

Thus, we will adopt a larger, almost all-encompassing definition of development, which takes into account the specificities of several organizations. The inconsistency between a seemingly monolithic progressive ideology of development and the myriads of practices that concealed segregationists and discriminatory and paternalist dimensions, could be one of the threads of our discussions and conversations in the two days.

What are the advantages of focusing on multilateral rather than bilateral foreign aid programs? First, such a perspective gives us access to the history of improbable encounters. It is at the headquarters of international organizations in Geneva, New York or elsewhere that missionaries, colonial officers, medical doctors, economists, lawyers and nutritionists discussed about the best way to go about developing a rural area or entire regions of the world. It is also within these multilateral spaces that various actors, coming from different parts of the world, including from countries that had no bilateral relations, could meet and exchange their views on development. Think about the Economic Commission for Europe in which Gunnar Myrdal could write to Walt Rostow and simultaneously to Polish or Czech economists.

International organizations are places where allegedly universal discourses on the validity of development are imagined, produced, and subsequently circulated in official documents and publications. But these allegedly universal and unifying official discourses are the result of struggles which can be traced in the sources. This, in turn, leads us to reflect on the very notion of development, on its alleged

ineluctability or inevitability. We believe that it is only by bearing in mind these two apparently contradictory elements that we can tackle the history of development in a more critical, sophisticated and sensible way.

SK

Our original contribution is to look at development in historical perspective. International organizations' officials and experts as well as social scientists, especially here in Geneva, have produced a valuable knowledge on development policies; what this conference offers is a long-term view on development discourses and practices. Working as historians, we believe that we can elaborate specific analytical categories of development.

As historians we also wish to add a few words on sources.

International organizations produce a lot of printed and official documents as well as unofficial and unpublished papers like correspondence, surveys, preliminary reports, field and back-to-office reports.

Some of these sources are written by officials who were prominent authorities in their field; think about economists Rosenstein Rodan for the World Bank, Gunnar Myrdal for the Economic Commission for Europe, Raul Prebisch for UNCTAD. Other officials are less famous but still renowned among their peers; think about Polish lawyer and ergonomist Jan Rosner or the Egyptian geographer and

anthropologist Abbas Mustafa Ammar, both involved in ILO development activities. All these individuals are representative of the quality of the expertise produced by IOs in the field of development. Nevertheless, we are fully aware that we should not overestimate their role and their impact within and beyond these organizations. The question of how to deal with the sources produced by these intellectuals within the Organizations for which they were working is wide open, and we hope to discuss it today and tomorrow.

Now, going back to the broader issue related to international organizations' sources, published records are relevant to get access to the official discourses produced by each organization, whereas the second kind of sources, when available to the researchers (which is unfortunately not always the case), provide historians with the inherent tensions that characterized the emergence of many of these development policies.

Furthermore, they give historians insights on the actual practices of development. They reveal the mechanics of these operations, their funding issues, the discrepancy between aims and reality, the myth of perfect planning and the reality of utter improvisation.

Last but not least, they unveil conflicts between the agents and national as well as local authorities. These various national actors can be heard in the IO sources, in particular in the correspondence, both as applicants and recipients of aid programs.

What we do not find in these sources are the voice(s) of the people on the ground. This is because in the perception of these organizations the recipients are not the people but local authorities and governments. This is yet another issue that we wish to address and discuss in the next two days. To put it bluntly: who were the targets of development aid programs undertaken by international organizations?

As a concluding caveat, before turning the floor over to Davide for one last time, we are fully aware that in order to hear or read about these voices, historians have to go beyond international organizations' archives and research national and local archives.

DR

Let us conclude by saying a few words about this conference's program. We regret to inform you that three participants could not make it: Jessica Reinisch, Heide Fehrenbach, and Shalini Randeria.

The organization of the panels is not an innocent, random choice. Panels have been arranged chronologically and thematically. They single out moments, themes, and issues related to the topic of this conference.

We have decided to give equal weight to *ante-litteram* development programs of the early-twentieth century and the post-1945 period. The program also underpins the importance of wars as catalytic moments of change and reflection on and about "development": the

First World War, the Second World War and, of course, decolonization Wars and the Cold War.

We have paid attention to colonial contexts, colonial legacies, and to development as a post-colonial project. Finally, within and across these panels we have identified threads, trends, ruptures and continuities that are intended to question established chronologies, views and historiographies.

SK

Felix, Davide and I wish all of us an enjoyable, fruitful and rich exchange. Thank you very much.