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The United Nations University: A New Kind of University

Soedjatmoko and
Kathleen Newland

IN 1969, THE late secretary-general of the United Nations (UN), U Thant, proposed the creation of a new international university dedicated to the furtherance of peace and progress. He envisioned a degree-granting institution, with a campus housing students and faculty from many countries, functioning under the auspices of the United Nations.

The committees, consultants, and UN officials who worked to translate U Thant's vision into a workable institution agreed rather quickly that what the world needed was not a new body of degree-holders but a new body of knowledge. This had to be generated through research. People and institutions capable of using it had to be strengthened through training. The new insights and methods that were developed had to be made widely available through dissemination. These imperatives became the central elements of the United Nations University's (UNU) mandate, as put forth in the University Charter

adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1973. At that point, the government of Japan pledged $100 million to the endowment fund for the university and offered a headquarters in Tokyo. This enabled the UNU to begin operating in September 1975.

The charter adopted by the General Assembly defines the UNU as "an international community of scholars engaged in research, training and dissemination of knowledge" on "pressing global problems of human survival, development and welfare." Its central objective is "the continuing growth of vigorous academic and scientific communities everywhere, and particularly in the developing countries."

Structure and Process

To carry out the tasks assigned in its charter, the United Nations University operates in a way strikingly different from traditional universities. In common with traditional institutions of higher learning, the UNU is dedicated to the advancement of knowledge concerning universal human problems, and has a mandate to apply the scholarly instruments of research, advanced training, and dissemination of knowledge to their solution. Missing, how-

Soedjatmoko is the rector of the United Nations University in Tokyo. Kathleen Newland is the special assistant to the rector of the United Nations University. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies of the United Nations University.

ever, are the degree students, the central campus, and the permanent faculty. In their place is a far-flung network of individual scholars and academic institutions engaged in research, training, or dissemination of knowledge under the auspices of the UNU. These individuals and institutions carry out the university's program, and through their interaction the UNU lives up to the charter's description of "an international community of scholars."

The concept of these networks emerged very early in the process of designing the UNU, and it has several purposes. The most obvious is to bring the best minds to bear on a given problem, given that the best minds are widely dispersed and that the UNU lacks the resources to attract them to and support them at a permanent, central site.

Furthermore, it was clear from the beginning that the UNU was not meant to raid other institutions in order to staff a large, permanent faculty; an essential part of its reason for being is to strengthen academic institutions around the world, particularly in developing countries. The network system is specifically designed to avoid aggravating the brain drain from Third World and other institutions; more than that, it actually strengthens these institutions by creating opportunities for their staff to participate in international research and training programs. The UNU is instructed by its charter to alleviate intellectual isolation, particularly of scholars in developing countries. Collegial exchange among the members of the various UNU networks is the major vehicle for achieving this.

The practical advantages of the network format go beyond those of intellectual contact. It fosters the exchange of research results among investigators who are working on the same problem in different geographical and cultural settings; on agroforestry, for example, in the highland forests of Costa Rica, the northern mountains of Thailand, and the island nation of Fiji. Scientific or technological successes achieved in one setting may be applied, with some adaptation, to others. And since academic departments are commonly organized among the lines of separate disciplines, a network may be almost a prerequisite for (though it does not of course guarantee) sustained interdisciplinary work.

Even more difficult to achieve than collaboration among scholars of different disciplines is collaboration across ideological and cultural orientations. The United Nations University is one of the very few forums in which such exchanges are institutionalized. The networks organized in the university's nine program areas routinely include researchers from all the continents, representing cross-sections of the major schools of thought on the subject at hand. The inclusion of participants from diverse backgrounds is designed to guard against the recognized pitfalls of ethnocentric approaches to problem-solving. The larger implications of the network format have been noted by Dr. Kinhide Mushakoji, vice rector of the regional and global studies divisions of the university:

> The complex package of global problems . . . can be coped with only if the leaders and people of the world with different cultural and ideological backgrounds, and hence widely values, agree to cooperate.

There are several different forms of participation in the UNU networks, both for institutions and individuals. Currently, the university's program is organized into nine program areas,

each of which contains a number of projects. A number of program areas also include postgraduate training activities. Many scholars have individual contracts with the university to carry out specific research tasks for a particular project. Others take broader responsibility for coordination of a project, or direction of an entire program area.

More than 120 academic institutions have contractual agreements with the UNU to carry out specific research and training activities. In addition, 39 academic bodies have been designated by the council as associated institutions of the UNU. These are existing universities and research organizations, or subunits of them, that have agreed to collaborate in particular parts of the university program over a period of several years. Some associated institutions participate in research, others in training, and several in both. The UNU's relationship with each institution is tailored to the circumstances and capabilities of the institution as well as to the requirements of the university program.

The associated institutions are a key element of the UNU network, making it a genuinely global university in practice as well as in theory. Eleven associated institutions are in Latin America, eleven in Asia, eight in Europe, five in Africa, three in North America, and one in Australia. The UNU's first agreement of association, for example, was concluded in 1976 with the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama in Guatemala City, an arrangement that continues today with research and training in the field of nutrition. The association with Chiang Mai University (CMU) in Thailand dates from 1978, when CMU began doing research and training for UNU projects on highland-lowland interactive systems and agroforestry systems.

Chiang Mai University has not only trained UNU fellows in its own facilities but has also sent members of its staff for training at another UNU associated institution, the Tropical Agricultural Research and Training Center (CATIE) in Costa Rica. The interaction between CMU and CATIE in the field of agroforestry is one example of the UNU networks in operation. It illustrates an important objective of the system: the fostering of South-South cooperation.

In addition to cooperating with existing academic institutions, the UNU is permitted by its charter to set up its own research and training centres. The first of these was established in 1984 in Helsinki, Finland. It is the World Institute for Development Economics Research, known as WIDER. A contribution to the UNU endowment by the government of Finland is earmarked for the institute. A second research and training center, the Institute for Natural Resources in Africa (INRA), was established in December 1986. When it becomes operational, INRA will be located in the Ivory Coast. Other UNU research and training institutes are in the planning stages.

The decentralized work of the United Nations University is planned, supported, supervised, reviewed, and evaluated by the staff at the University Center in Tokyo. The rector, based in Tokyo, bears the primary responsibility for both the administrative and intellectual direction of the university. With his colleagues at the center, including four vice rectors, the rector directs the internal management and external relations of the UNU as well as its program and institutional developments. His role involves both forward-looking planning—to anticipate the issues that will be of greatest concern in the immediate future so that

the UNU can help prepare for constructive deliberations in the United Nations and elsewhere—and continuous review and evaluation to ensure that the work of the university remains relevant to the central issues of the day.

The United Nations University's ability to function as an academic institution within the United Nations system depends on its immunity from political pressure. It has three basic guarantees of such immunity. One is the strong statement in Article 2 of its charter, which says:

> The University shall also enjoy the academic freedom required for the achievement of its objectives, with particular reference to the choice of subjects and methods of research and training, the selection of persons and institutions to share in its tasks, and freedom of expression.

The charter guarantee is reinforced by the way in which the UNU is governed. The governing body is the University Council, which has 24 members appointed jointly by the secretary-general of the United Nations and the director-general of UNESCO. These two officials are *ex-officio* members of the council, as are the director of UNITAR and the rector of the UNU. The appointed members—though chosen with broad geographical distribution in mind as well as representation of major scientific, academic, and cultural trends—serve on the University Council as individuals, not as representatives of any government or institution. The chairman of the council, who serves a one-year term, is nominated and elected by the council members from among their own ranks. The council has final authority over the policies and the budget of the university.

The UNU is further protected against politicization by its methods of financing. Unlike most United Nations organizations, it does not depend on annual appropriations by governments to support its budget; nor does it receive regular funds from the United Nations or UNESCO. Its chief source of income is the earnings from a permanent endowment fund. The fund was established by the generous contribution from the Japanese government and has been augmented by several other countries. All member states of the United Nations are invited to make voluntary contributions to the endowment. In addition, governments, foundations, and private bodies are encouraged to contribute to the operating costs of specific activities. The basic security of an endowment income, however, protects the UNU from any financial pressure to cast its conclusions in a particular light.

The UNU's Agenda: Global Learning

The mandate of the United Nations University is to work on global issues of "survival, development, and welfare." During the first five years of its existence, the university concentrated heavily on development. Programs on world hunger, the use and management of natural resources, and social development addressed what were then considered to be the most urgent aspects of development.

In 1981, the Governing Council of the UNU adopted a set of guidelines, known as the Medium-Term Perspective (MTP), to broaden and make more comprehensive the work of the university. From a continuing concern for and experience with development issues, the UNU moved decisively to address issues of survival and welfare.

Five themes were delineated to organize the UNU's program of work in the period 1982-1987:

- peace, security, conflict resolution, and global transformation;
- the global economy;
- hunger, poverty, resources, and the environment;
- human and social development and the coexistence of peoples, cultures, and social systems;
- and science and technology and their social and ethical implications.

These themes were meant to expand rather than confine the scope of the research, training, and dissemination of knowledge carried out by the UNU.

These very broad themes obviously have not been exhausted in the six-year program they guided, and are likely to continue to define the parameters of the UNU's area of emphasis. But the themes and the specific research topics arising from them must be articulated in the context of a world that is continually changing, and changing at a dizzying pace. Therefore, the concerns of the UNU must evolve in order to respond to—and ideally, to anticipate—the mutations in the shape of existing problems, the emergence of new problems, the changing perspectives on the perceptions of problems, and the shifts in the intellectual climate prevailing in different cultural settings. The university addresses its work to practical problems, but also seeks to illuminate the basic relationships underlying them rather than merely to prescribe short-term responses.

As a result of the rapid pace of events, some research topics and approaches have become obsolete. The next generation of issues—for the UNU and the academic world in general—lie at the intersection of traditional disciplines and fields of study: security and development, environment and human settlement, hunger and poverty, climate and human modification of the environment, interdependence and autonomy, technology and culture. As these interfaces are approached, it becomes obvious that, often, the basic conceptual tools for dealing with them are inadequate. The work of the UNU should help to develop such tools. They will have to go beyond sectoral approaches, area studies, and even interdisciplinarity to find new modes of analysis for dealing with complex realities.

One of the lessons of the 1980s, which was brought out in the first MTP, is how naive traditional notions of development have been, and how inadequate for illuminating the complexities of simultaneous social, economic, political, technological, and cultural change. Development cannot be separated from the state of ecosystems, from the turbulence in the international system, from the impact of scientific discoveries. It cannot be accomplished within the confines of a single nation-state, given the interpenetration of global and national economies. It has become clear that political factors are as critical as economic ones for development, and indeed that the two can hardly be separated. Economic stagnation and uneven or distorted economic growth are the seedbeds for political conflicts which in turn rebound upon growth. Conflict resolution is therefore a vital factor in development.

Much of the conventional wisdom about the mechanisms of development have been called into question by the experience of the past 10 years. Conventional ideas about appropriate technology, for example, have lost their relevance in the face of advances

in microelectronics, informatics, biotechnology, and such areas; today it is clear that appropriate technology must be a sophisticated blend of the traditional and the most advanced techniques. Similarly, prior notions of self-reliant development have been overtaken by the pace of events in international currency and commodity markets, in science and technology, in the international division of labor. The experience of industrialization in the North has lost much of its value as a template for industrialization in the South. Strategies for industrialization, rural development, and employment creation require fundamental revision.

One might well question whether the traditional concept of development—as a linear progression through well-defined stages—is not obsolete. Certainly there is a need to think about it in radically different ways.

The rapidity of change and the resulting disorientation have produced powerful cultural reactions. Aspirations have been raised and then blighted, traditional values shaken or reinforced, religious convictions challenged or reaffirmed. The difficulty of living with rapid change has encouraged in many people a turning inward toward primordial affiliations based on ethnicity, religion, language, or region.

The importance of closely and honestly examining cultural factors in development, without either romanticizing or denigrating them, has become very clear. The ability of the social sciences to grasp and comprehend traditional values within a society must be heightened so that the social sciences might move closer to an understanding of the world views held by various cultures and civilizations. Traditional values are imbedded in a great many levels and sources: religion, custom, language, and so forth. In trying to grasp values, the social sciences would benefit from a closer alliance with the humanities.

The UNU is trying to participate in the redirection of the social sciences so that they can contribute to the capacity of societies to understand and adjust to rapid change. The social sciences must better equip themselves to deal with technology and ethical issues, with new social actors and problems of social cohesion. Definitive changes have occurred that shape new social realities: for example, today's enormous, often alienated youth cohorts, chronic unemployment, the easy availability of arms, and the heightened intensity of religious, ethnic, and regional passions. The social sciences can no longer content themselves with describing the outcome of change. They must cultivate an understanding of the dynamics of change: not only how things have changed, but why.

With the rapidity of change and the inability or unwillingness of established institutions to adjust quickly to new circumstances, more and more people throughout the world are looking outside of established institutions for frameworks of meaning and action. The growth of nonparty politics, underground economies, independent religious movements, new citizens' campaigns, and so forth, all of which might be termed "protestant movements," illustrate the extent of disaffection. A new political and social agenda has been set, whether through peaceful insistence or violent confrontation. The achievement of social cohesion in the face of multiple fissiparous tendencies is one challenge that the social sciences should address.

For 10 years, the UNU has actively assisted institutions in developing

countries to build up the scientific strengths of their staffs through training and collaborative research projects. The focus has been on those areas of research and training that have direct practical relevance to the most pressing needs of society. Thus, for example, food, nutrition, and energy studies have been prominent in the UNU training program. But at the same time it has become apparent that the developing countries cannot afford to concentrate exclusively on the applied sciences. To do so would be to condemn themselves to the role of perpetual consumers of scientific and technological innovations from the North. The key to autonomy in this sense is indigenous innovative capacity, and this can only grow on the basis of rigorous training in the basic sciences. The UNU should position itself to provide modest ut significant support for such training.

The limitations of technology transfer as a vehicle for the advancement of the Third World have emerged as major constraints on development. Technology transfer has commonly been attempted with little investigation of or regard for the absorptive capacity of the society to which techniques are being transferred. Greater emphasis is needed on the properties that foster innovation and cultural adaptation of imported technologies—properties such as academic freedom, the encouragement of creative nonconformity, willingness to question received wisdom, and a system of reward for innovators. Similarly, the impediments to innovation should be examined. The question of cultural adaptation is particularly important for the maintenance of a sense of identity and cultural continuity in the face of rapid technological change. The relationship of technology to culture, val-

ues, human rights, employment patterns, and other similar areas deserve much more profound examination.

Perhaps the most far-reaching lesson of the past 10 years is the importance of learning, which is a more comprehensive process than being educated. Education implies a top-down process, involving in some fashion a student and a teacher, or at least a medium of instruction. Learning is an open system. It includes self-generated knowledge acquired through experience or observation, interaction, sharing of information, experimentation, and feedback in addition to instruction. It involves individuals, groups, and institutions as well as whole societies and cultures. Both on the individual, cognitive level and the social, adaptive level, development is a learning process. If it is not, it is a mere varnish or, worse, an imposition.

The UNU in the first MTP coined the term "global learning." It was a deliberate double entendre, meant to convey both the sense of learning as a global process that must involve all levels of society, and the sense of learning to think globally, in recognition that the world is a finite, closely interconnected, single system. Global learning also implies a recognition of new needs for learning. It seeks a better understanding of the learning process, at various levels: the assimilation of information; the capacity to turn information into knowledge; the capacity for integration, synthesis, and judgment; and the capacity for collective learning. In a period of rapid and accelerating change, learning, in all senses, is a legitimate area for research and a crucial area for action.

The United Nations University is attempting to make a mark in an intellectual landscape whose features are scarcely recognizable from the per-

spective of even 10 years ago. The growing appreciation of the inherent complexity of natural and social reality and the awareness of the inadequacy of previous approaches to development have been mentioned. These are positive manifestations that clear the way for a more sophisticated understanding of the world around us. But there are many negative features as well: growing intellectual intolerance, the breakdown of communications among different schools of thought even within disciplines, the narrowing of vision caused by overspecialization, a diminution of consensus on basic concepts and methodologies, increasing limitations on access to knowledge for reasons of commerce or national security. It is against this background that the efforts of the UNU to break down intellectual barriers and foster new knowledge gain their significance.

Key Themes: Global Life Support and Governance

Two general strands of inquiry are likely to dominate the work of the UNU in the medium term, arising in response to the features of the contemporary intellectual landscape and out of the broad research front established by the first MTP. One of these concerns the management of global life-support systems; the other concerns governance. The two strands are closely interwoven—indeed, inseparable. Both must be seen in the context of a crowded, competitive, interdependent, and rapidly changing world.

In dealing with global life-support systems, the UNU will of course be dealing with natural resources—their productivity, sustainability, and appropriate usage. It must relate resource systems to demographic changes such as population increase, urbanization, and migration, as well as to scientific and technological advances. In many cases, operationally significant scientific knowledge is still lacking, meaning that decisions must be made under conditions of great scientific uncertainty.

Sectoral approaches to resource management have often proved to give only fragmentary guidance to resource policy. The UNU has experimented with the ecosystem approach. But that too has limitations. Ecosystems have tended to be treated in isolation, while they are in fact interconnected. Also the concept of a resource system may need to be expanded to include the created environment—including the policy environment—as well as the natural environment. The food problem, for example, is not only of cropland and rangeland, forests and fisheries. It includes not only the food that is produced but also the distribution systems, income levels, and entitlements that determine who eats it.

Food and nutrition are among the most critical elements of life-support. The UNU has achieved recognition and credibility for its efforts to assist developing countries to deal with food and nutrition problems. These problems are inseparable from the other issues with which the university is concerned, such as poverty, health, the impact of new technologies, productivity, and the role and status of women.

In its activities that touch upon the management of global life-support systems, the UNU will have to work at three different levels: the theoretical level, the applied level, and the level of scholarly exchange. All are necessary to capitalize upon and expand

new insights into the relationship between the geosphere and the biosphere and the impact of human activities on both.

The management of life-support systems inevitably also involves problems of governance. Governance does not mean government, but rather the aggregate of forces, systems, institutions, disputes, and arrangements by which human beings cooperate and compete. Problems of governance include, very broadly, the problems of violence, alienation, the fragmentation of polities along lines of group affiliations, the loss of legitimacy by governments, and the lack of accountability in economic, political, and social systems, among others. The UNU should try to identify and illuminate the problems that are inherent in system-building, system-maintenance, and system change, as well as the control and direction of systems that have no "head." Of particular importance are grass roots social movements, which often merge with or blossom into irresistible forces for redemocratization or national liberation. Frameworks of human interaction as diverse as private financial markets, transnational corporations, labor migration, drug trafficking, resource regimes, religious movements, and cultural phenomena should be encompassed in the study of governance.

Within the domain of governance the UNU must also continue to deal with the crisis of the state and the state system. The crisis of the state is a crisis of the relationship between the state and its citizens, and of the relationships among citizens, within the context of powerful transnational processes. Weak political socialization has left many people, especially the young, alienated from the political systems under which they live. In some cases, the state apparatus has been captured by a group or groups of special interest which use it to support their own parochial ends. Responses to alienation include political violence, with a resultant weakening of the moderate center and polarization of societies, as well as common criminality, which has become a dominant feature of urban life in many countries. There is more than enough combustible material in the debris of political systems to fuel the next generation of terrorists.

Perhaps the most fundamental problem of governance that has emerged in recent years is the growing division of humankind into two separate worlds of rich and poor. Today, this is a far more complex phenomenon than the geopolitical division of the world into North and South, industrialized and developing. Today, the well-to-do in Cairo, New Delhi, Lima, and Lagos have far more in common, and communicate more easily, with the well-to-do in New York and Paris than they do with the poor in their own countries. This makes genuine discourse across the gap immensely complicated. When the major problem on the international agenda was the North-South divide, at least there were sovereign governments to speak for the unprivileged, even if their voices were often ignored. But who speaks for those who are ignored by or alienated from their own governments? Today, the discourse between the two worlds is steadily diminishing, and threatens to find its only forms in violence or occasional spasms of charity.

The UNU program attempts to deal with these problems by finding the researchable issues the illumination of which might contribute to a greater capacity to deal with problems. The

purpose is to find ways in which the human and social costs of rapid change can be minimized, disparities reduced to tolerable levels, and the resilience of societies increased.

Conclusion: Building Sensible Responses to Change

The academic search for alternatives is not a matter of advocacy of particular solutions. Rather, it is a matter of pursuing, through the instruments of scholarship, two distinct but related tasks. One is to identify and help to remove the scientific uncertainties that obstruct understanding of possible solutions and prevent an informed choice among them. The other is to seek to identify the political, cultural, and institutional dynamics of change and identify the factors that have a bearing on the possibility of constructive responses to change.

The real challenge to scholarship today is to keep up with the changing nature of the issues that confront societies, and to endeavor to provide the knowledge base that will allow sensible responses to change to be formulated. There is no way of knowing whether the world is now in a process of disintegration or in a convulsive transition to a better state. But it is certain that choices made in the near future will determine which of these turns out to be true.