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Rethinking Development:
The United Nations University and its Work

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In the aftermath of the massive global crisis that was World War II, the then much smaller community of nations devised a creative and co-operative arrangement for the promotion of a safer, more stable and prosperous world: namely, the United Nations system, whose fortieth anniversary we will celebrate next year. Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar has expressed his hope that this will be an occasion for the Member States to rededicate themselves to the principles and spirit of the United Nations Charter. The timing is more than felicitous. For it is no exaggeration to say that the world is again facing a crisis of global proportions, different in nature but, in its own way, as threatening to humanity as World War II. The crucial question is: will today's community of nations be able to come up with a constructive collective response to today's crisis?

Today, more than three decades after the post-World War II development effort was launched, the world remains conspicuously and tragically beset with unacceptable suffering, want and strife, as the gap between rich and poor continues to widen. The reasons advanced as to why development has not worked as it should are many - economic, social, ideological and historical. But I believe the most important of all the lessons to be drawn is the recognition of our failure to deal effectively with the problem of poverty. If anything, the scale of international poverty is even larger today than it was in the past despite the relatively higher growth rates some developing countries have achieved. According to the World Bank, average per capita income in the poorer countries of Africa has been falling for the past 10 years. As many as 100 million Africans are affected by hunger and malnutrition, and one out of every 200 Africans is a refugee. These facts are symptomatic of a process of economic and environmental decay which, compounded by political instability, has turned drought into famine.

Average per capita income has also been falling in much of Latin America. It has now dropped to the 1976 level in Brazil, and below the level of 1970 in Argentina. Here, the proximate cause is debt, not drought, but long-term processes are also at the root of the problem.

The problems of development have became so intimately interlinked with the functioning - or malfunctioning - of the international economic system that it no longer makes sense to speak of development as an endeavour carried out by individual nation-states. The debt crisis, the plunge of commodity prices, the instability of international financial markets illustrate that the developing and the industrialized countries are inextricably bound together in a single global economy. Structural adjustments are necessary on both sides, and in the multilateral institutions that are meant to service and control the workings of the international economic system.

The unitary nature of the international political system is perhaps a more obvious point - though even more difficult to come to grips with. What is increasingly relevant, however, is the extent to which both domestic and international political preoccupations are linked. One of the clearest manifestations of this can be found in the debate on the relationship between security and development. Something on the order of 150 wars have been fought since 1945, most of them in the Third World. This relentless instability and violence is a crippling constraint on development. Even in the absence of overt war, the level of expenditure on armament drains the resources and distorts the priorities of the developing and industrial countries alike. Yet, there is no point in denying that there are real security threats

and security needs, both internal and external, to which responsible governments must respond. Some of these arise from the scope and rapidity of social change, much of which is associated with the development processes itself, which can be and often is profoundly destabilizing. We must engage ourselves now in a search for approaches to security and development that are mutually reinforcing. The capacity for conflict resolution is as important to development as it is to security, for it enhances a society's resilience and capacity to absorb social change without resort to violence.

There are other factors, also lying to an extent outside the control of governments because of the manner in which modern societies are linked together in the international industrial system. A third industrial revolution is now taking place, based on advances in biotechnology, microelectronics and information technology, and materials technology. If the countries of the South do not develop the capacity to participate in this revolution, they will become even more vulnerable and dependent on the North than they are now. They can no longer afford to think in terms of closing a knowledge gap. Rather, they will have to leap over a whole generation of outmoded technologies and theories of organization. The developing countries do not have time to repeat the mistakes of the North, or even to follow passively in

their footsteps picking up techniques that they have outgrown and discarded.

Certainly the countries of the South, the latecomers in industrialization, will have to reconsider their industrialization strategies. The original assumption that marginal industries would move from the North to the South in order to be closer to cheap labour or to natural resources no longer applies, because new forms of automation now make it economically possible for such industries to stay in the North. The South will have to consider in what areas it will compete with the roboticized North and, at the same time, devise ways to deal with the massive unemployment that is affecting its societies.

No one has the answers to these problems. Only a handful of people are beginning to think about the fundamental review of the processes of industrialization that will be required to avoid developing new kinds of dependencies as a result of the third industrial revolution. To take one other example, the green revolution was based on research results that were freely available from the international institutes that did research on rice, wheat and maize. Now, in the wake of the decision of the US Supreme Court that allows for patenting of advances in biology, the Third World -- whose future viability will, to a large extent, depend on a second green revolution -- will have to buy

such information unless it develops its own capability in the areas of biotechnology. The same kind of challenges apply to microprocessors, communications and materials technology. There is emerging an entirely different world of industrial and social development in which new lessons apply. We will not only have to learn the technologies involved -- that goes without saying -- but we will have to develop capabilities in the frontier areas of knowledge, in addition to all the other areas in which we are trying to catch up.

I do not mean to overlook or belittle the accomplishments of the development effort to date. In the fifties, sixties and early seventies many developing countries experienced far higher growth rates than the industrialized countries did in their own early periods of growth. A number of them have moved from dire poverty into the range of the comfortably middle class. Outside the strictly economic sphere, we can point to the eradication of smallpox, once one of the great scourges of humankind; to the dramatic reduction of infant mortality rates and the extension of life spans in many countries; to the slower, but still marked, reduction of fertility rates. We should not forget, even as we confront the problem of too-rapid population growth, that this growth is based on a reduction of premature death.

It is only when measured against the remaining and growing needs of the world's poor majority that the achievements of post-war development disappoint. The scale of accomplishment has not been commensurate with the task, and we must make the most rigorous attempt to understand why, so that we can plot a more satisfactory course.

Of all the disappointments of the development effort, the failure to come-to grips with poverty is the most bleak. The prevailing asymmetry in levels of living, between nations and within them, is simply insupportable. It is a drag on the prosperity of the entire international economic system. Yet the structural causes of the persistence of poverty have escaped satisfactory economic analysis - perhaps because so many of these causes lie outside economics, narrowly defined. The causes lie a6s much in the realms of politics, culture, and social dynamics. Perhaps it is the daunting complexity of these interwoven factors that has limited the scope of analysis. Scholars and scholarly institutions have a responsibility here: they must not allow relevance to fall victim to the desire for analytical simplicity and elegance. It is possible, for example, to study the management and stabilization of the existing world financial system, and still leave unquestioned the terrible asymmetry between rich and poor. Similarly, it is perfectly possible to devise a formula for balancing supply and demand, but at such low levels

of consumption that millions of people are unable to realize their productive potential.

The old maxims which once guided the world's economic functions, power balances, resource allocations, energy uses, and societal arrangements, are everywhere being questioned in the face of increasing fragmentation, instability, and an awareness of shared vulnerability. These old formulae might have been able to provide a slim and precarious measure of stability during the early post-war period. But they ignored basic issues of structural change and cultural diversity, at both global and national levels, that now demand attention.

Recalling the high hopes that many of us had in those heady days of 1945 when the United Nations was born, it is not easy to be optimistic about the dawn of the twenty-first century. Tensions between the superpowers are tauter than for many years; progress toward any kind of arms control, much less disarmament, is minimal; the world economy is in dangerous disarray; millions of people are poor, homeless, hungry, with no prospect of improvement in their lot; throughout the world, and particularly in developing countries, the structures of societies are showing themselves incapable of adjusting to change quickly enough.

It is clearly a time for greater understanding and greater effort. Yet the reverse is happening. In many industrialized countries impatience with the lack of progress being made, coupled with slow moving recovery from economic recession, is leading to reduced financial support for the developing world and also to increased insistence on bilateral aid where, often the decisions on how money should be spent are based on considerations other than real development needs.

There has been no shortage of analysis of the problems of the Third World or indeed of the globe. Definitive reports on the state of the human condition as a whole, or in particular areas, seem to appear almost every month. Generally they tell a depressing story: despite much dedication and expertise, problems are mounting, resources are dwindling; the sum total is that conflict, poverty, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy - simple human hopelessness and misery - are not being adequately reduced.

There are many reasons for this, some historical, some political, some cultural, some natural. But part of the fault lies, I believe, with the analysis of development problems, which is fragmented and contradictory in its diagnosis of the problems. Too much of it is based on inadequate knowledge or outmoded assumptions. Very often, we are not even asking the right

questions. However, events do not slow down in order that our analytical capabilities may catch up with them.

There is here a real challenge to scholarship, to keep up with, or at least remain aware of, the changing nature of the problems that confront societies today, and to endeavour to provide the knowledge base that will allow sensible responses to them to be formulated. Are we seeing a world in disintegration or a world in transformation toward a better state? We don't know, but the attempt to arrive at a reasonable course of action must be able to call upon a body of relevant research and reflection. This is not only a matter of getting the facts; it also requires the mobilization of scientific capabilities. Unquestionably, there are tremendous reserves of scholarly resources that are not directed toward the resolution of urgent global problems. Governments and intergovernmental bodies do harness scientific talent to the pursuit of policy goals. But a full mobilization would seem to require mechanisms through which scholars can organize themselves into networks of knowledge that are problem-oriented rather than discipline-oriented. The United Nations University is engaged in an effort to develop just such arrangements.

As you may know, the United Nations University was established with the adoption of its Charter by the United Nations

General Assembly in December 1973, and began its operations in Tokyo in September 1975. Thus we are one of the newest members of the United Nations family, looking toward the celebration of our first full decade in the autumn of this year.

When you think of the great European universities, with their traditions stretching back for five hundred years or more, the UNU is a newcomer indeed. But the UNU is new not only in chronological terms: it is really a new kind of University, for an international community that faces new kinds of issues. The UNU is unique, in the first place, in that it is the academic arm of the United Nations. Therefore it has one foot in the academic world and one foot in the UN system. In a way, we enjoy the best of both worlds. We are protected by our Charter, by our Council, and by our independent financing against the interplay of political pressures that operate within the United Nations, but we enjoy a more activist mandate than most Universities: our Charter instructs us to use the instruments of scholarship to address the pressing global problems of human survival, development and welfare.

The structure of the UNU is also very distinctive-- to the point that some people question why we are called a University! For example, the UNU has no student body as such. Rather, its work is directed to scholars, policy-makers and the general

public all over the world. Our research programme operates through a decentralized network of scholars and academic institutions, co-ordinated by our headquarters staff in Tokyo. For example, the director of UNU research projects in the field of natural resources and the environment is Dr. Walther Manshard of the Georgraphisches Institut at the Universitat Freiburg. Dr. Manshard co-ordinates a group of researchers that ranges from Malaysia to Costa Rica, from Papua New Guinea to the Ivory Coast.

The UNU has agreements of association with 37 academic institutions around the world; these institutions co-operate with us in carrying out our programme of research, and also in training, according to our specifications, post-graduate fellows who then return to their home academic institutions with their skills and experience augmented. In addition, our networks include large numbers of collaborating scholars, universities and research institutes from more than 60 countries.

The Charter of the UNU permits us to establish our own research and training institutions. The first of these is about to open its doors this year, in Helsinki, Finland. It is the World Institute for Development Economics Research, or - as we call it by its acronym - WIDER. We are also attempting to find

the financing for an Institute for Natural Resources in Africa - INRA.

The idea for a United Nations University was first put before the U.N. by the late Secretary-General, U Thant.
U Thant's original vision of a United Nations University was of an institution devoted to peace and progress. The UNU Charter reflects this vision in its instruction that the University focus its research on "survival, development and welfare". During the first five years of existence, the work of the University concentrated heavily on the second of these. Under the current Medium-Term Perspective, the UNU has moved more strongly to address issues of survival and welfare, from its standing concern for and experience with development. The current programme of research reflects the larger concept of development that has evolved in the last decade and a half-- a concept that includes political and social as well as economic and technical change.

The UNU programme in the 1984-85 biennium is closely aligned with U Thant's vision as framed in the Charter. It approaches the inseparable problems of peace and progress at three levels: that of the material quality of life, that of distribution, and that of long-term structures of society and processes of change.

The main thrust of the programme is research directed toward increasing both the physical wherewithal for a satisfactory

standard of living and the knowledge and tools needed to use it to best advantage. The physical underpinnings of an acceptable level of living include most prominently food, energy, and the natural systems that support their production. The UNU has research programmes on energy systems and policy; resource policy and management; the food-energy nexus; and food, nutrition, biotechnology and poverty, which concentrate on these resources--their productivity, sustainability and appropriate usage. The UNU project on agroforestry is one example of a project that combines all three of these concerns. It is contributing to the design of systems of cultivation that are at once ecologically stable and economically productive. Many agroforestry systems include both food and energy crops, as well as livestock. UNU research in this area is concentrating on the development of agroforestry systems suitable for small farmers in the humid tropics.

I think I should make one distinction very clear at this point, in case some of you are wondering how the UNU differs from the specialized agencies of the UN, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Health Organization, the World Bank, and so forth. These are all action agencies, which the UNU is not. They are involved in field work; we are involved in scientific research. The UNU is engaged in developing the knowledge base upon which the design and implementation of action

programmes can be soundly based.

The framers of the UNU Charter did not equate development and welfare. Progress in the state of the human condition is not just a matter of the growth of GNP or stocks of material goods, as has long been recognized. The distribution of resources is a more important determinant of the average level of living, and therefore, of the welfare of society. For this reason, the UNU devotes a substantial portion of its resources to the study of the distribution of wealth and power, at virtually every level from the household to the world system, including distribution within nations and within regions. For example, we have a project called "Household, Gender and Age" which examines the part that sex and age play in determining an individual's place in the family, including contributions to and claims on the household's resources.

At the national level, our African regional perspectives project is examining the apportionment of surplus capital accumulated from agriculture between peasant producers and the state apparatus. The Arab alternative futures project is concerned with the distribution of both wealth and power among the countries of the region. The sudden accumulation of oil wealth in the hands of a few countries has not only produced great

movements of labour, wage scales and material expectations; it has also caused a decisive shift in the balance of political influence in the region, with the old established centres of Arab culture such as Egypt deferring to the new centres of surplus capital such as Saudi Arabia.

Increased production and more even distribution of the material goods that support human standards of living are important indicators of progress. But in order to understand fully the condition and the prospects of society, it is also necessary to study the political, social and economic structures that perpetuate deprivation; the constantly shifting international environment; and the deeper sources and processes of change. Several UNU research projects address these more abstract but equally fundamental questions of peace and progress. For example, the project on peace and global transformation recognizes that the absence of overt violence does not guarantee survival as long as structural violence in the form of inequality and exploitation persist. Furthermore, the sweeping social and economic changes that are essential to development themselves generate conflict, within and among countries. Many societies seem to be confined to the choice between two unacceptable alternatives: on the one hand stagnation, acceptance of the status quo with its weight of structural violence; or change brought about by overtly violent struggle. The UNU studies on peace and conflict resolution

address the problem of bringing about peaceful but purposive change.

Several projects in the human and social development programme area take up issues of macro-sociological change. There is one that undertakes a comparative analysis of major episodes of political, social and economic change in non-European societies: the Meiji Restoration in Japan and the revolutions in China, Mexico and the Soviet Union. Another project is examining the origins of and impulses behind new social thought. A third is eliciting from contemporary thinkers and activists from the world's major religions their views on desirable directions for social development.

UNU research on these three issues-- material progress, distribution, and processes of change has as an overarching goal the better understanding of the dynamics of development-- development in the largest sense, which encompasses welfare and survival as well as an improved material standards of living. The UNU programme aims to help develop both practical and conceptual tools to enable people, institutions, and states to participate constructively in development.

The UNU Charter recognizes that it is not enough simply to produce these tools. In addition, the University must actively

work to put them into the hands and minds of those who need them. For this reason, training and dissemination play a large part in the UNU effort; the University is also engaged in the study of learning theory.

You will have gathered from this review that the scope of the UNU's work is very broad indeed. Sometimes we are criticized for trying to do too much as a relatively small institution. The case for maintaining considerable breadth and openness in our programme of research rests on three factors. One is that in order to remain relevant, the UNU must be experimental; it must constantly scout the frontiers of knowledge and prospect for emerging issues. Ideally, I would like to think that the UNU is a precursor of a new generation of institutions of higher learning -- institutions that are global in their approach, that are not tied to a particular cultural or national viewpoints -- institutions that are capable of looking at the world as a single system. The complexity of the problems of our age, the degree to which they are inextricably interwoven, demands this kind of approach.

A second factor arguing for breadth in our programme or work is that the UNU has a great many diverse constituencies, both regional and topical. It has a responsibility, as part of the UN system, to be responsive to them.

The third, and compelling, reason for working on a wide spectrum of issues is that the coherence and veracity of our picture of the human situation depend on it. Even if the UNU is not doing the definitive study on each element of the human situation, we cannot afford to ignore important aspects completely. To do so would run the risk of distorting reality and might imply misleading guidelines for action. For example, very few studies of distribution penetrate beneath the level of the household. By remaining at too high a level of aggregation, they miss a critical problem of welfare and distributive between males and females in the family. The UNU is not pursuing a major programme of work on women's issues; but it does have two projects which grasp the issue of distribution within households.

I would like to give you several examples of the kind of gaps in existing knowledge that the UNU is trying to help fill, because I think that this is the best way to convey a concrete sense of what this University is all about.

One of our longest-standing research projects is investigating protein and calorie requirements under field conditions in the Third World. You may think that this information is already in hand, but in fact, the estimates of minimum daily nutritional requirements that are in standard use are based on clinical studies of healthy, normally well fed North American college

students. The requirements of Third World villagers are not strictly comparable: the effect of common parasites on the metabolism of certain nutrients is a major factor, for example.

The UNU research takes the investigation of actual nutritional needs one step farther, with a study of the kind of adaptations that under-nourished people make in order to bring their expenditure of energy into balance with their inadequate intake of dietary energy. It is estimated that at least 85% of the adaptation must come from reduced physical activity-- a finding which has serious implications for labour productivity, for example, or the development of cognitive skills in children.

I shall mention just one more research activity in this field of enquiry. It is well known that iron deficiency anemia is extremely wide-spread in the developing countries, but there is little concrete appreciation for what that implies for people's bodily functions. UNU field researchers are carrying out investigations in Chile, Egypt, Indonesia, Thailand and Venezuela into the actual effects of iron deficiency on vulnerability to disease, actual incidence of illness, ability to learn, capacity for physical exertion, maintenance of body temperature, performance at work, and so forth. It is only through the accumulation of basic scientific data like these that governments can set realistic goals and priorities in public health.

Similar kinds of gaps exist in basic knowledge about the effect of large scale changes in vegetation on the climate and the long-term productivity of natural systems. There is widespread recognition of, for example, the fast and accelerating pace of deforestation in the humid tropics, and great concern has been generated, but the fact is that there is very little scientific measurement and monitoring of the impact of human intervention in this least-studied of the earth's major land ecosystems. The evidence we have is mostly anecdotal; yet it is clear that the implications are so grave that we really cannot afford to continue on a trial-and-error basis to tamper with the earth's own life-support systems. It is for this reason that the UNU has a research programme on the interaction between climate, vegetation and human activities in the humid tropics. In fact, as I speak a major UNU conference is being held in Sao Jose dos Campos, Brazil, that is bringing together the leading tropical climatologists, soil scientists, biologists, limnologists, and so forth, to present scientific papers and exchange views on the state of current knowledge and the research that still needs to be done.

By dwelling on these two examples, I do not wish to leave you with the erroneous impression that the work of the UNU is exclusively concentrated on the natural and applied sciences. We have extensive projects of research in the social sciences, some

of which I have mentioned briefly, such as our Regional Perspectives projects. The hallmark of these projects is that they are eliciting the interior views of Third World scholars about the issues that confront their own societies. It will not surprise you to hear that their views are often quite different from those of western analysts. The UNU is also conducting research in some hard-to-classify areas at the frontiers of knowledge. For example, we have an interdisciplinary project that is examining the behaviour and management of unstable, complex system. It draws on insights from fields as diverse as physics, economics, neurophysiology, and communications theory.

Both the form and the substance of the UNU are still evolving, and must continue to do so. Think of the changes in the international environment that have occurred in the last ten years, of how many major issues and problem have arisen, taking most of us more or less by surprise. Who could have foreseen the magnitude of the most recent global recession, or the enormity of its impact on the Third World? Who could have foreseen the multiple dimensions of the crisis in Africa? Who would have expected that in a supposedly secular age, religion would suddenly surge to the forefront of political and social change? Who could have anticipated that a so-called economic recovery would leave many of even the most advanced industrial countries

with residual levels of unemployment that threaten to tear the social fabric irreparably?

It may be impossible for any institution to display such consistent foresight. But I do think that the UNU has developed the flexibility to respond quickly and responsibly to the need for new insights based on sound scholarship. The long-term impact of the recession will be high on WIDER's list of research priorities. INRA, among other UNU projects in Africa, attempts to address the root causes and possible ways out of the crisis of that continent. Long after the current drama in Africa has left the headlines, these UNU efforts will still be there, trying to contribute to making a repetition of the crisis less likely.

There are no models for what we are trying to do, either for the content or the organization of our work. We cannot anticipate what the pressing global issues of 1995 will be, at least not in their entirety. But we can ensure, I believe, that the United Nations University remains as a flexible and foresighted institution, responsive to the storm-clouds that may gather on the horizon.