Whither United Nations Economic and Social Ideas?
A Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT: This article sets out a working framework to analyze the contribution of the United Nations (UN) to global economic and social policy, and to development discourse and practice, at the start of a mid-century research effort. It seeks to better understand the sources, evolution, and impact of key UN development ideas, and the role of the UN as an intellectual actor in the multifaceted marketplace of ideas. The first part of the article outlines how recent literature about ideas has informed our work. The second part evaluates methodological debates with special attention to the shortcomings of ideational approaches, addressing conceptual difficulties in dealing with ideas, and offering some thoughts about what these debates might add to our understanding as well as ways that contributions to scholarly debates will result. The third part poses key research questions and outlines how we propose analyzing the relationship between ideas and policy.

KEYWORDS: constructivism, economic and social development, idea, oral history, UN

Ideas and concepts are a driving force in human progress, and arguably the most important legacy of the United Nations (UN) for economic and social policy and development. In the first year of the twenty-first century, for instance, long-standing and contentious notions were behind several visible international gatherings. In the year before this article went to press, many ideas debated and negotiated in UN corridors over previous decades—including the redistribution of wealth, the necessity for power-sharing and transparency, the benefits of market liberalization, and the need for sustainability—resurfaced in headlines and media images. They included: the revival of the Group of 77 in Harare in April 2000; the many-striped

There is no adequate study of the origins of the idea of national sovereignty in the United Nations. The most important and influential works of today, however, are based on the United Nations Charter.

The story begins in 1945, with the creation of the United Nations. The Charter was drafted by a group of American diplomats led by Harry S. Truman and Charles E. Franklin. The Charter was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on February 6, 1945, and came into force on October 24, 1945.

The Charter is a document that sets out the purposes, principles, and procedures of the United Nations. It is the foundation of the United Nations and is often referred to as the United Nations Charter.

The Charter is divided into four parts: the Preamble; the Purposes and Principles; the Organizational Structure; and the Provisional Arrangements. The Preamble sets out the objectives of the United Nations, which are to maintain international peace and security; to develop friendly relations among nations; to achieve cooperation in solving international problems; and to promote higher standards of living.

The Purposes and Principles section sets out the fundamental principles that guide the workings of the United Nations. These principles include the maintenance of international peace and security, the promotion of friendly relations among nations, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and the observance of obligations under international law.

The Organizational Structure section sets out the structure of the United Nations, including the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the International Court of Justice, the Secretariat, and the specialized agencies.

The Provisional Arrangements section sets out the procedures for the establishment of the United Nations, including the election of the first Secretary-General, the establishment of the United Nations Trusteeship Council, and the implementation of the United Nations Charter.

The Charter is a dynamic document that continues to evolve. The United Nations has added new articles to the Charter over time, and it has also made changes to existing articles. The Charter is a living document that continues to guide the United Nations in its efforts to promote peace, security, and cooperation among nations.
Insights from the Idiomatic Literature

What, then, is the role of ideas or ideational paradigms in the making of policies? Although the term 'ideational' has been frequently used in the literature on international relations, its meaning is not always clear. The term 'ideational' can refer to different things, including the beliefs and values of individuals or groups, the ideas and concepts that are used to structure political debate, and the intellectual frameworks that guide policy making.

In the 1970s, the term 'ideational' was applied to the study of how ideas and beliefs are translated into policy. This approach emphasized the importance of ideas in shaping policy making, and it was often associated with the work of scholars such as Samuel Huntington and Charles Kindleberger. More recently, the term 'ideational' has been used to refer to the study of how ideas are used to justify and legitimize policy making, and it has been associated with the work of scholars such as John Ruggie and Peter Katzenstein.

The first section of the article presents an overview of the history of ideas in international relations. It discusses the relationship between ideas and policy making, and it presents some of the key concepts and theories that have been used to study the role of ideas in policy making.

The second section of the article presents an analysis of the role of ideas in policy making, and it presents some of the key findings from the literature. It argues that ideas play a central role in policy making, and that they are used to justify and legitimize policy making.

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elites with particular expertise in areas such as the AIDS pandemic and the environment (Young, 1989; Haas, 1990; Ostrom, 1990; Goosvick, 1991; Cohen, 1992) who, despite differences of view, are more development thinkers.

A related approach is Hall's study of the cross-national spread of ideas among Keynesian experts in the post-war period (Hall, 1990). This study concludes that ideas of economic policies spread widely because of increasing hegemony around the world. The study also points out that the social role of Keynesian economists remained essentially the same in the post-war period, which influenced the subsequent development of economic policies profoundly. In fact, the dominant culture remains important to maintain the status quo, even in the face of new theories and perspectives (1990). The literature about international organizations swimming against the tide of conventional wisdom has been sparse, and perhaps with good reason. Hall's (1993) work within a framework of ideas and standards suggests that new ideas can only be used by those who control them (1993). This discussion makes it all the more necessary to examine how ideas about economic and social development over the last half-century and the UN system has spawned or nurtured a number of them — may have called into question the status quo.

Another variation, which American political science calls 'constructivism', argues that national conditions and power are unimportant, but that they are not cast in concrete. This approach views politics as socially constructed — that is, grounded in social norms and interactions because it is possible for agents (decision-makers, states, and institutions) to change their values, strategies and tactics rather than merely be defined by their material conditions.

The more conventional problem-solving theories in international politics, neoliberal institutionalism and neorealism assume the rigidity of predetermined material interests and power. Constructivists like Wendt and Ruggie explore what the more mainstream theories ignore. They seek to explain how rules, interests, systems, and material structures were initially constituted and thus, by extension, how they also can be changed. Thus, they emphasize that agency and interactions produce and reproduce structures of shared knowledge and power. As such, ideas are important tools for change. In other words, there is a two-way street. States establish intergovernmental organizations like the UN, but ideas can then be generated by such institutions or by other member states within intergovernmental forums. These, in turn, help shape state behavior. The continual and often substantial changes in policies toward development assistance, sustainable

issues at the top of the international agenda when many would have preferred that they be downgraded or even disappear. NGOs with a broad membership base such as the 'green' lobby also can mobilize the media and thereby mass support for an idea.

The third body of literature seeks to determine the potential for individuals, their governments, and international institutions to change perspectives and policies rather than merely react mechanically. The so-called critical approach most often associated with Cox is a variation that views the United Nations and other international organizations as functional instruments to maintain the status quo, posing few challenges to existing international hierarchies. Although in this perspective ideas are largely imposed on the powerless by the powerful through the deliberations and actions of intergovernmental organizations, Cox and his followers do not hide their normative agenda. Like us, they seek ways through which international organizations and regimes may be restructured to achieve a more just world order.
Methodological Challenges and Potential Contributions of Eclecticism

At the start of their study for The Spread of Economic Ideas, which ranged from professionals to the woman on the street, A.W. Coats and David C. Colander (1989) ask why the processes and institutions ‘through which economic ideas are transferred from individual brains into the general inventory of ideas and eventually into policy have not been considered seriously’. They conclude that the ‘concepts are vague, the institutions hazy, and the process messy’ (Coats and Colander, 1989: 1). In his review of idealist approaches, Mark Blyth (1997) contends that they ‘are not conceptually clear; the causal mechanism is opaque; and the methodology lacks rigour’ (p. 453). In his work on the influence of Keynesianism, Hall (1989) acknowledges uneasiness even among those who accept the crucial role of ideas: ‘Any attempt to specify the conditions under which ideas acquire political influence inevitably reverts on the brink of reductionism, while the failure to make such an attempt leaves a large lacuna at the center of our understanding of public policy’ (p. 4).

Our eclecticism seeks to overcome the alleged shortcomings of the literature about the power of ideas, although Checkel (1998) would undoubtedly still be dissatisfied with what at this stage could only be ‘empirical ad-hocisms’ (p. 325). We would like to review some of the controversies, explain our choices and assumptions, and suggest the potential insights from an intellectual history of the UN. There are five questions frequently raised about existing approaches to the study of ideas and international organizations.

The first is the classic sequence: does the chicken (idea) precede or follow the egg (policy)? Most analyses do not explain the sources of ideas, just their effects. They rarely explain how ideas emerge or change, with the exception of signaling technological innovations as a cause. By ignoring from where ideas come and how they change, cause and effect are largely indeterminate. Do ideas shape policy? Or does policy push existing ideas forward and perhaps even generate new ideas that respond to a new policy or action? Do ideas serve simply as ‘convenient justifications for a policy or a decision’? The Scottish historian of thought, Quentin Skinner, raised these issues 30 years ago: ‘[T]he social context, it is said, helps to cause the formation and change of ideas, but the ideas in turn help to cause the formation and change of the social context. Thus the historian ends up presenting himself with nothing better than the time-honored puzzle about the chicken and the egg’ (1969: 42).

We assume that the relationship between ideas and policymaking and decision-making is dialectical. Ideas have an impact on policy choices and...
who seek support from foundations or governments understand that the 'atmosphere' at the time of grant applications is crucial to securing adequate resources. Similarly, atmospheres help explain why certain ideas make a specific difference at one moment rather than another, or in one place rather than another. They help explain why ideas and their institutional sponsors may be 'fashion' or 'behind the curve'. For instance, the call for a Special UN Fund for Economic Development (SUNFED) fell as partially deaf, and, mainly Western, ears in New York not because it was a bad idea or unnecessary but rather because of a preference for the Bretton Woods institutions. And the IDA was the result (Dell, 1986: 44).

A fourth question regards deciding at what point to begin tracing the trajectory of a particular idea. We agree with Woods that 'very few ideas are very new' (1995: 168). For example, Frederick Cooper and Ronald Packard (1997) point out that certain modernization theory points to rational and achievement-oriented beings; but the idea of creating a new person could be traced back at least to the evangelical idea of the earliest colonial missionaries (Cooper and Packard, 1997: 17), if not the Garden of Eden. Thus, at what point in its life or in which of its many possible incarnations should one begin to study an idea? A related question concerns ownership because ideas can emerge in more than one place simultaneously.

The difficulty of identifying a single individual or institution responsible for the creation of an idea is one illustration of this problem. [The] 'cult of the genius or intellectual-hero' is quite common but 'seems only as fashionable' (Collins, 1998: 1) because ideas often evolve through discussions among opposing groups. That reality is particularly pertinent within multilateral institutions because it is polycentric and other groupings is the usual way of doing business (Thakur, 1990). Indeed, anonymous authorship of documents is the typical working procedure, and the widespread sponsorship of drift evolutions and the broadest possible ownership of ideas are actually goals of multilateral deliberations.

Hence, we are not undertaking the type of historical analysis pioneered by A.D. Overey, who sought to trace an idea 'through all the provinces of history in which it has occurred' (1973: 15). Rather, we are more pragmatic. We pick up an idea at the time it intersects with the UN. Our study is limited to what happened to a particular idea within the world organization, although we do not assume in advance that the key shaping of an idea occurs within it. Even within the UN's history there are relevant antecedents that can only be treated cursorily: for instance, de-colonization and localization contain important elements of the contemporary debate about 'good governance', but in-depth analysis begins when this idea became widespread in reports or on inter-governmental agendas in the 1980s.

The fifth and final perceived 'shortcomings' addressed here regards the influence of ideas versus that of the carriers of ideas (Vee, 1996). There is
The Prognostic...
somewhat from those of the previous decade. Resolution 2020 on ODA’s critical context was intended to encourage host countries and organizations to work together to address the challenges posed by the pandemic and to ensure that resources are effectively mobilized and used to support countries in their recovery. The document emphasizes the importance of sustaining support for ongoing projects and initiatives, particularly in sectors where the impact of COVID-19 is most pronounced.

In terms of how to achieve this, the document outlines several key areas for focus:

1. **Supporting Health Systems:** Resources need to be directed towards strengthening health systems in developing countries, ensuring that they are better prepared to respond to future pandemics and able to deliver essential services to their populations.

2. **Economic Recovery:** Initiatives aimed at supporting economic recovery should prioritize equitable distribution of resources, ensuring that the benefits of recovery reach all segments of society, particularly the most vulnerable.

3. **Environmental Sustainability:** investments in sustainable infrastructure and renewable energy should be prioritized to build resilience against future shocks and promote long-term development.

4. **Social Protection:** Enhanced social protection mechanisms are crucial to mitigate the impact of economic disruption and ensure that the most vulnerable populations are not left behind.

The document also underscores the importance of international cooperation and collaboration, highlighting the role of the United Nations and other international organizations in coordinating efforts and ensuring that support is effectively targeted and delivered.

Overall, the document calls for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic, emphasizing the need for sustained and focused efforts to achieve sustainable development goals.
the organisations’ effectiveness’ (Coates, 1986: vii). Indeed, digitally recorded and transcribed observations by key players will be a significant product in itself and an original source for other scholars and practitioners.

We are not unaware of the dangers inherent in an eclecticism drawing upon existing ideational approaches. For meta-theorists, our approach may seem a way to avoid or finesse tough epistemological and methodological choices. However, given the lack of basic information and data about the nexus of ideas, international policy-making, and multilateral institutions, we are prepared to accept the criticism and proceed with an ambitious enough effort at intellectual history. In short, we contend that the ideas held by individuals as well as transnational groups of experts and activists influence UN economic and social activity; that the UN and its institutions influence national elites and their policies by developing policy paradigms around which such elites are socialized; and that the UN learns and adapts through a collective and often anonymous decision-making process, which produces new ideas and at times silences or represses older ideas.

We do not locate source ideas within ‘expert’ groups, NGO activists, and national decision-makers as well as international secretariats. Examining their beliefs, lobbying styles, and actions during parallel conferences will allow us to understand better not only their relationship with the UN, but why some ideas were promoted and others set aside or distorted. We examine, particularly through the oral history interviews, UN responses to major global events such as the Cold War and the NIEO. We attempt to determine the degree to which the UN’s adaptation can be explained by a process of learning. In addition to looking at how national policies shaped UN ideas, we also seek to determine how the culture of the world organization, for example its institutionalized style and hiring practices, determined the development of surrounding ideas and thus influenced what ideas could be heard and eventually implemented. Institutionalist approaches help us understand the dynamics between ideas and UN institutions, on the one hand, and changes in national policies, on the other. We also examine how ideas evolved within a particular UN agency, how they spread among other UN agencies, and how they influenced national policies by providing ideas during times of global change, as presumably UN secretaries did for the G77 in the 1970s and 1980s.

The emphasis on agency and its potential for shaping national interests and identities is sustained by constructivism. The central version pushes analysts to take a broader view of the UN as an intellectual actor, highlighting both its successes and shortcomings. Failures are as important as successes in order to understand the UN’s role in facilitating consensus, in supporting and perpetuating, or exploding, myths and orthodoxies. The effort to document the uses of ideas is one means to foster more fruitful international discussions, negotiations, and common approaches. In the world of ideas, the UN system undoubtedly should do better than in the past in swimming against the powerful currents of orthodoxy, whatever their origins. As Amartya Sen, the 1999 Nobel Laureate in Economics who has played a major intellectual role within and outside the United Nations, prods us: ‘The need for critical scrutiny of standard preconceptions and political-economic attitudes has never been stronger’ (Sen, 1999: 112).

Notes
1. They are seeking to map quantitatively how five development ideas (the informal sector, sustainable development, governance, social capital, and local knowledge) have been presented and been interpreted by eight intergovernmental organizations (World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, the International Labour Organization, the Asian Development Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the African Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization). Their goal is to track how these ideas were translated into policy, modified (or distorted) in the process, and accepted or (rejected). McNell and Bois also argue that ‘few doubt the power and influence of these institutions’, but ‘we know next to nothing about why some particular ideas are taken up by institutions in the multilateral system’. (Bois, 2000, 1; Bois and McNell, forthcoming).

2. For more information, the interested reader is referred to http://www.unhistory.org.

3. Robert Mandel, the 1999 Laureate, worked as a staff member at the IMF in the early 1960s.

4. For supporting arguments but which call into question the desirability of such a shift, see Moos and Schmitter, 1995.

5. For Goldstein and Keohane (1993), ideas consist of world-views, principled beliefs, and causal beliefs. According to them, world-views are broad and may include conflicting normative beliefs as well as religious, ethical, and cultural ones; and principled beliefs are normative ideas of what is right and wrong and therefore are narrower guidelines for what the world should look like.

References
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