REVIEW

Sustainable Development in the United Nations System from Concepts to Action

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: This study aims to analyse how the United Nations system acts as a generator and disseminator of knowledge in the implementation of its development mandate.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH: The paper reflects on the one side, an historic overview of the evolution of the concept of development and, on the other side, an action-oriented approach on knowledge management in the United Nations system at present, supported by the author's experience of 30 years of work with the United Nations.

FINDINGS: The United Nations is not just an honest broker and facilitator among donors and recipients of development assistance. As a promoter of development co-operation, the United Nations has influenced international thinking. The vision on development that the world organisation proposed with the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development is built upon knowledge acquired over its entire existence.

ORIGINALITY: By means of desk research at the macro level, the paper identifies the most significant events related to development, and shows how the accumulation of new ideas and dimensions led to the contemporary concept of sustainable development. In addition, the author presents a micro analysis of knowledge production and its use in the United Nations system—policy research uptake, learning policies, knowledge management frameworks—based on personal observations and data collected as co-ordinator of relevant reports of the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations.

IMPLICATIONS: As the paper reflects a practitioner's experience as a diplomat and a United Nations Inspector, the paper includes some recommendations for action, from a system-wide perspective, based on the practices of the most influential United Nations funds, programmes and specialised agencies.

PART ONE: THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED NATIONS
The Legal Background

The history of the United Nations shows that the primary purpose of the organisation was to prevent world wars and to maintain international peace and security. The Charter of the United Nations was conceived in times of war and that logic was indelibly reflected in its initial evolution.

Article 1 of the Charter suggests the first key to understand the place of development in the United Nations system:

"The Purposes of the United Nations are:

1. To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace;
2. To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;
3. To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and
4. To be a centre for harmonising the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends."

The first paragraph of Article 1 indicates explicitly that the organisation is supposed to take effective collective measures for the maintenance of peace. The second paragraph is again subservient to the main purpose; that is, universal peace. The third paragraph is no longer as imperative as the first. It indicates nevertheless the essence of the mandate of the United Nations in all other areas than peace

and security: it is *an organisation for international co-operation*. Therefore, the international co-operation and the harmonisation of "*the actions of nations*" serve the primary purpose. While action against acts of aggression and other breaches of peace can be imposed, international co-operation cannot. It should be promoted, facilitated, stimulated, by ways of recommendations. It is what Article 13 (2) says later in the Charter, with respect to the mandate of the General Assembly, which encompasses less power but a much broader area of competence. Nowadays, the United Nations responsibilities seem to cover almost all possible areas of international co-operation (see also Article 55 and Article 62, among others).

Understanding that imbalance between purposes and means in the United Nations system, will give us a better picture of the huge effort that all Charter principal organs, as well as the funds, programmes and specialised agencies have made throughout the years to address so many challenges, with limited means.

Despite this minor, but significant, genetic insufficiency, the United Nations has fuelled a spectacular evolution of the meaning of its work of "*promoting international co-operation in the economic, social, cultural, educational, and health fields*", as stipulated in Article 13 of the UN Charter.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was … development.

The Emergence of the Economics of Under-Development

One should recall that before the establishment of the United Nations, development was not an object of study for economics. The under-development in the world economy was almost completely overlooked. The famous textbook of Paul Samuelson, *Economics: An Introductory Analysis* (re-edited 19 times between 1948 and 1967), ignored the problems of developing countries like they had never existed (Kapur *et al.*, 2011).

It was the United Nations Secretariat that started a ground-breaking work in the study of the world economy from the standpoint of development and under-development. The first results were three of considerable practical and theoretical importance for the future action of the United Nations in support of developing countries: *National and International Measures for Full Employment* (UN, 1949), *Measures for the Economic Development of Under-Developed Countries* (UN, 1951a), and *Measures for International Economic Stability* (UN, 1951b).

This triad contributed greatly to the emergence of a new vision on the problems of developing countries. Among their authors, distinguished economists and academics, are Arthur Lewis and Theodore Shultz, Nobel Prize for Economics in 1979 "*for their*

pioneering research into economic development research with particular consideration of the problems of developing countries".[1]

The conclusions of these landmark studies were continued by other top-level economists, including the former executive head of the UN Economic Commission for Europe, Gunnar Myrdal, Nobel Prize for Economics in 1974.

Those pioneering contributions to the economics of development raised awareness of the need for concerted action at international level to accelerate the development of the poor countries. If at present this idea is common place, during the first years of the United Nations such a need was not at all obvious. The political and financial interests of the West were limited to the Marshall plan for Europe, while the global perspective was marginalised.

Indeed, the three reports mentioned above contained really revolutionary proposals for their time. They could be considered the first agenda for development of the United Nations. Unfortunately, the ideological dispute between the champions of the liberal capitalism and those of centrally planned economies promoted by the socialist countries, did not allow the United Nations to follow the recommendations as such. The main ideas, though, continued to gain importance.

One of the notable consequences was the establishment of a "*Special Fund which would provide systematic and sustained assistance in fields essential to the integrated technical, economic and social development of the less developed countries*" (UN, 1957); these would, *inter alia*, facilitate new capital investments of all types (private and public, national, and international). Other events were the establishment of the Economic Commission for Latin America (1948) and of the Economic Commission for Africa (1958).

The United Nations continues to use the knowledge of distinguished economists, as it was the case of the first chairman of the United Nations Committee for Development Planning,[2] established in 1960, the Dutch economist Jan Tinbergen, Nobel Prize for economics in 1969.

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[1] In fact, the first Nobel Prize economist (received in 1984) that contributed to the work of the United Nations is Richard Stone, as author of the report of the Sub-committee on national income statistics of the Leagues of Nations Committee on statistics experts entitled "*Measurement of national income and the construction of social accounts*", published by the United Nations in 1947. The reports led to the System of National Accounts used by the United Nations and improved constantly.

[2] Significantly enough, after the end of the Cold War and the triumph of neoliberalism, the name of this body was changed to the Committee for Development Policy, to avoid any echo of central planification of economy.

The First UN Decade of Development (1961-1970)

The process of decolonisation supported by the United Nations resulted in an unprecedented expansion of its membership. The issue of development had to be followed with increased attention and received broader political support.

The developed countries, the United States included, acquiesced the new thinking and displayed willingness to give assistance to developing countries according to a newly shared principle of international solidarity and participation in development co-operation. It was President John F. Kennedy who proposed to the General Assembly, on 25 September 1961, that the 1960s be designated "*United Nations Decade of Development*":

In his own words:

"Political sovereignty is but a mockery without the means of meeting poverty and illiteracy and disease. Self-determination is but a slogan if the future holds no hope. That is why my Nation, which has freely shared its capital and technology to help others help themselves, now proposes officially designating the decade of the 1960s as the United Nations Decade of Development […] … Development can become a cooperative and not a competitive enterprise—to enable all nations, however diverse in their systems and beliefs, to become in fact as well as in law free and equal nations" (John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, 1961).

The UN General Assembly responded by passing a resolution on the 'United Nations Development Decade' (1710 (XVI)) on 19 December 1961.

U Thant, then Secretary General admitted the beginning of a new thinking of development:

"At the opening of the United Nations development decade, we are beginning to understand the real aims of development and the nature of the development process. We are learning that development concerns not only man's material needs, but also the improvement of the social conditions of his life and his broad human aspirations. Development is not just economic growth, it is growth plus change." (UN, 1962a)

One of the changes that followed was the introduction of the economic and social consequences of disarmament in the debates on development. The final conclusion of

a very influential report drafted by renowned scientists was as valid in 1962 as it is in 2023:

> "There should be no doubt that the diversion to peaceful purposes of the resources now devoted to military expenditure could and should be of benefit to all countries and would lead to improvement of world social conditions". (UN, 1962b)

The developing countries gained a collective voice and negotiating power, in particular after the formation of the Group of 77 developing countries in 1964 (G77).[3] The establishment of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964, consecrated as a specialised forum for which the promotion of the interests of developing countries was the main responsibility. Notably, the first secretary-general of UNCTAD was the prominent Argentinian economist Raul Prebisch, who previously served as the Executive Director of the Economic Commission for Latin America. His theory about structural economics and the economic development of the periphery considerably influenced the thinking on development at the United Nations.

The Special Fund and the Expanded Programme of Technical assistance consolidated in what became the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The Second UN Decade for Development (1971-1980)

However, at the end of the first decade the results were not satisfactory. The resolution that launched a Second Decade found that, in practice, the international co-operation for development was not commensurate with the problem itself: "*partial, sporadic and half-hearted gestures, howsoever well intention, will not suffice*", and the release of resources from the arms race to development did not happen. Conceptually, however, the United Nations moved forward.

The International Development Strategy as a means of achieving the Decade's objectives, called for a major part of financial transfers to developing countries to be provided in the form of official development assistance (ODA),[4] and that developed countries should allocate such assistance to a minimum level of 0.7% of their gross domestic product (GDP).

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[3] This coalition is now called the Group of 77 and China, and contains 134 countries.
[4] Official development assistance (ODA) is defined by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) as government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries.

The Conference on human environment (1972) brought new dimensions to the notion of development. Protecting and improving the natural environment were put forward as a solemn and special responsibility of humankind. The natural heritage "*must be safeguarded for the benefit of present and future generations*", while "*the environmental policies of all States should enhance and not adversely affect the present or future development potential and developing countries*" (UN, 1972).

A Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of states was adopted in 1974. A landmark World Population Conference was held in Bucharest in the same year. Its slogan was "*Development is the best contraceptive*". New front lines were opened by the Conference on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (Buenos Aires, 1978), and the Conference on Science and Technology for Development (Vienna, 1979).

The most important and ambitious agendas proposed during this decade were the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (UN, 1974a), and the Programme of Action on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (UN, 1974b), both adopted by the General Assembly, in a special session, on 1 May 1974. The Declaration defined the New International Economic Order by means of 20 principles to be fully respected as "*one of the most important bases of economic relations between all people and all nations*". The Programme of Action was meant to complement and strengthen the goals of the International Development Strategy for the Second United Nations Development Decade.

The United States rejected the proposed order and so did liberal and neoconservative economists. However, the idea was seriously taken under consideration among the alternatives for the future of development in the global context and for Africa, by another winner of the Nobel Prize for economics, Wassily Leontief (Leontief, 1977). Although some of the particular measures envisaged have been taken, the aspiration to a New International Economic Order lost relevance in light of the more consensual global agendas agreed later. At present, though, the General Assembly notes that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, and the Paris Agreement adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, carry forward many of the ideas and recommendations contained in the concept of the New International Economic Order (UN, 2022).

The Third UN Development Decade (1981-1990)

The Third Development Decade was less rich in proposing new dimensions, so it focused on a re-examination of themes that had emerged from earlier conferences. One of them was the relationship between disarmament and development, very relevant

at the peak at the confrontation of the Cold War, and the fight for influence of the two main opposed ideologies including by supporting developing countries. Again, scientists and diplomats demonstrated that security consists of not only military, but also political, economic, social, human rights and ecological aspects.

Interesting enough, the disarmament-development relationship was no longer seen as mutually exclusive. A United Nations study identified areas where the body of expertise and knowledge involved in dual-purpose technologies offer opportunities for redirection of military related technologies for civilian purposes (UN, 1986a).

Two other major conceptual moves, although not intended by the international strategy development that accompanied the Third Decade, added new significant dimensions to development as promoted by the United Nations: the right to development and sustainability.

The Right to Development

A very significant change in tackling the notion of development was the emergence of the right to development as a key argument in the discourse of the developing world. This did not come from the blue. Indeed, one of the most robust and lasting achievements in the United Nations history was the tenacious codification of the international law on human rights, starting with the Universal Declaration. Human rights became part of not only East-West disputes but also North-South. Developed capitalist societies were the champions of civil and political rights, socialist countries favoured economic, social and cultural rights, while the newly independent countries, in need of economic assistance to consolidate their political independence, gave priority to economic and social rights. Against its background of political neutrality, the United Nations adopted a balanced approach and produced two major covenants: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted in 1966, effective 1976), signed and ratified now by an overwhelming majority of UN member states. In that context, a moment of considerable importance was the *Declaration on the Right to Development* (UN, 1986b) that signified the passage from a rather soft notion to a human right properly defined, for whose "*full exercise and progressive enhancement*" international co-operation is fundamental.

The First Definition of Sustainable Development

In terms of substance, the body of knowledge on development knew an inflexion point with the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, also

known as "*Our common future*" or the "*Brundtland Report*", that launched the first widely accepted definition of sustainable development:

> "Sustainable development is the development that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN, 1987).

Twenty years later, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, also known as the Earth Summit, produced, and reported to the General Assembly a comprehensive Declaration of 27 guiding principles for sustainable development and Agenda 21, representing a set of practical actions to be taken at international and national level. The Earth Summit also came with the opening for signature of two major conventions: the United Nations Framework Convention of Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity (UN, 1993). It is worth noting that the Rio Conference also signified a substantial contribution of non-governmental organisations to the debate.

The Human Development Reports

The 1990s and the wave of optimism that accompanied them were dominated in terms of knowledge building and conceptual innovation by the UNDP Human Development reports and indexes. The series of reports based on the human development theories of another Nobel Prize winner, Amartya Sen (India) (who worked with Mahbub ul Haq from Pakistan), seemed to circumvent some of the controversies over the neoliberalism and GDP growth as the best way to define development. The reports and the human development index paved the way for widely accepted statements such as "*people are the real wealth of a nation*" and "*the basic purpose of development is to enlarge human freedom*".

The first report, issued in 1990, set the tone that would be developed in an annual series of analyses transformed into a flagship report of the whole United Nations development system, both in terms of measuring human development and in expanding its meaning. The globalisation itself was meant to take "*a human face*".

As the conventional categorisation of countries in the "three worlds" was no longer relevant, a new category was brought to the fore: "countries in transition". While there was no intention or attempt to offer a proper definition to the new syntagma, its roots lie clearly in a 1990 resolution of the General Assembly adopted at its 18th special session: "*Eastern European countries were not appropriately involved in the world*

economic system", "*their need for comprehensive reform and transformation grew*", "*a gradual convergence of views on economic policy ... emerging*". In other words, transition means the end of history for the centrally planned economies and the triumph of liberal capitalism (UN, 1990).

Two years later, this semantic and political choice became official in the United Nations system, with resolution 47/187 entitled "*Integration of the economies in transition into the world economy*", adopted on 22 December 1992. This concept will survive, but only for a short while.

An Agenda for Development

The beginning of a new stage in the evolution of the United Nations point of view on development was the report, *An Agenda for Development* proposed by Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1994. The document was a successful attempt to incorporate all theoretical and practical dimensions of development on which the United Nations would elaborate for decades. Those dimensions were spelled out clearly:

- Peace as the foundation;
- The economy as the engine for progress;
- The environment as a basis for sustainability;
- Justice as a pillar of society;[5]
- Democracy as good governance.

One of the most interesting statements made in the Agenda for Development (a document that bears personal imprints of Boutros-Ghali, but which was revised through consultations with all Member States) is the concise diagnosis on the status of development after the end of the Cold War:

> "The concept of development, and decades of effort to reduce poverty, illiteracy disease and mortality rates, are great achievements of this century. But development as a common cause is in danger of fading from the forefront of our agenda, The competition for influence during the cold war stimulated interest in development. The motives were not always altruistic, but countries seeking to develop could benefit from that interest.

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[5] The notion of justice in this context looks and it is somehow unclear. The considerations that follow the title of this section of Agenda for Development indicate that it is about social justice.

Today, the competition to bring development to the poorest countries has ended. Many donors have grown weary of the task. Many of the poor are dispirited. Development is in crisis". (UN, 1994)

Another prominent economist, Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel Prize for economics in 2001, also participated in enriching the understanding of the development in the United Nations system. He influenced the debates around the topic by proposing a new paradigm of development as a "*transformation of societies*" (Stiglitz, 1998).

The Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015)

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) may not have been very different in terms of ambitions and complexity than previous agendas and strategies. What makes them special is their programmatic nature. They went behind the enunciation of principles and general objectives, and identification of fundamental values; they spelled out specific targets and a timeframe that would allow a better way to measure progress and impact, in a transparent way.

The Millennium Declaration that led to the adoption of the MDGs enjoyed strong support at the highest political level, perhaps the most consensual since the creation of the United Nations. This makes one of its lines a very powerful statement:

"We recognize that, in addition to our separate responsibilities to our individual societies, we have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level." (UN, 2000)

In conceiving the MDGs, the United Nations resorted once more to the economic sciences, benefiting from the co-operation and advice of Jeffrey Sachs, a prominent University Professor at Columbia University, who acted as a director of the United Nations Millennium Projects' work on MDGs and later as development advocate for the United Nations Secretary-General.

The effort made sense. Although not all the targets had been reached, MDGs produced progress in all the areas involved. They proved that measurable indicators and specific responsibilities were affordable, even for an organisation with no power other that its values and the knowledge mobilised for the benefits of all states. MDGs encouraged the UN member states to continue the practice of agreeing upon such programmatic documents.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the most ambitious and comprehensive document adopted by the United Nations since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As I have tried to demonstrate, the new agenda did not come out of the blue. It was a continuation of the knowledge built over many decades of thinking and working on development issues, adjusted not only to the challenges it has addressed, but also to prevailing economic ideas in different historic periods. Notably, the United Nations has constantly revised its original uptake, by mobilising the intellectual energies of brilliant economists and adding its own imprint on the concept of development. As the practical impact of the UN strategies and policies was limited by the funds put at the organisation's disposal, the knowledge and ideas it has produced went beyond the classic theory, that development should be left at the mercy of the invisible hand of the market.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were conceived as an unprecedented expression of multilateral, integrative and transdisciplinary work, and a new underlying approach was expected to operate in their implementation. While the Millennium Development Goals were a collection of separate goals, the 2030 Agenda intended to be universal and indivisible. It was not directed to the developing world only, but to the entire world development system. It aims at bringing together the three main pillars of the United Nations: peace and security, development, and human rights. As all Member States promised to implement the 2030 Agenda, the United Nations system is also expected to fuel more collaborative patterns and synergies at national level.

Knowledge and Development

The bar being raised that high, it appears that knowledge can play the role of ultimate federative factor of the 17 goals and 169 targets. Knowledge is the main connector among United Nations Charter organs, specialised agencies, funds and programmes, and the multitude of non-state stakeholders. Knowledge is the common denominator of all mandates and actions by the United Nations, which goes beyond thematic and geographic borders. More than goods, services and capital, knowledge is what fuels the dynamics of our globalised and interdependent world.

The United Nations system is the generator of a special kind of knowledge, one based on values, solidarity, and social justice. It was knowledge about all potentially conflicting spheres of interaction that made co-operation and codification of international law and action among Member States possible, in so many areas of high complexity and diversity: from outer space to the high seas, from communications to

trade, from health to intellectual property, to name but a few. It was the promotion of knowledge about human dignity that made the authority and the comprehensiveness of the United Nations core treaties on human rights.

It was the United Nations that has gradually enhanced awareness of our interest in systematically protecting the natural environment, at a time when many governments were busy making nature yield to their will. Based on the diffusion of scientific knowledge, after many years of stubbornness, governments across the world accepted the reality of climate change and the responsibility they had in taking immediate action to stop a suicidal trend.

If the new approach on the SDGs implies building bridges between so many protagonists and areas of interest, knowledge is the raw material of which those bridges are made. Knowledge means lessons learned from the past, and new ideas and approaches. The United Nations is not just an honest broker and facilitator among donors and recipients of development assistance. It is not just a conveyor belt of funds from the developed to the developing world. As a promoter of development co-operation, the unbiased knowledge captured by the United Nations is its only negotiating force.

It is that institutional knowledge that still demands to be better valorised. The use of financial resources without value-based knowledge is waste. The development of technologies without human-centred content is meaningless. To be more than an aspiration, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development should support the active mobilisation of knowledge generated and shared in the service of global public goods by the United Nations system and other international organisations, governments, the private sector, civil society organisations, and academia.

The following section will attempt to identify the challenges the United Nations organisations and their staff are facing in knowledge production and use, from three of its multiple angles: policy research uptake, institutional and individual learning, and knowledge management. The main vantage point will be system-wide: the United Nations is seen as a system not as group of individual organisations.

PART TWO: MANAGING INTERNAL KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES IN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM
Policy Research Uptake

The production and absorption of new ideas has been an essential asset of the United Nations; it allowed the adaptation of its policies to the dynamics of the economic and ideological environment. Therefore, efficient policy research production (internally

generated or outsourced) and research uptake, in the absence of sufficient budgetary allocations, is crucial.

However, at the level of the daily work, as I concluded in a report prepared for the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations, while the major conceptual products, such as flagship publications and other research products of a global scope, represent a highly visible interface between the United Nations system and Governments, universities and the public at large, its internal research processes have never been considered major organisational vectors (Dumitriu, 2018).

This section does not deal with the research associated with the landmark conferences and agendas that are convened for Nobel Prize winners and other prominent development economists, but with the research that is needed every day in the execution of projects and programmes and in informing governing bodies and other decision-makers.

It is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—with its universal, holistic, and integrative approach that cuts across all dimensions of sustainable development— that makes collaborative actions and interdisciplinary approaches at the system-wide level imperative. Achieving the SDGs requires, among other things, evidence-based policies and planning at all levels.

Adequate research uptake is essential in order to comprehend the dynamic trends in economic, social and environmental developments and to anticipate and prevent emerging challenges by channelling and supporting critical thinking in policy debates.

> The meaning of policy research uptake as used by the JIU report encompasses all activities that:
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> (a) support the supply of research by ensuring that research topics are relevant through engagement with intended users, communicating research effectively, and synthesising and repackaging research for different audiences; and
> (b) support the use of research by building the capacity of research users, in particular policy-makers, to access, evaluate, synthesise, and use evidence.

The demand for policy research across organisations in the United Nations system responds to various imperatives, differentiated by the nature of their respective mandates and responsibilities in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the specific necessities related to programmes and projects, changes in strategies and adaptation to the dynamics of the operating environment. Beyond such differences, there are several organisational purposes for which the support of policy research is essential:

- to generate evidence that can inform and guide policy, programming and advocacy, shape priorities and support operational activities;
- to collect and analyse data in order to identify and monitor trends, patterns, and emerging issues in an objective and trusted manner;
- to make available relevant criteria for decision-making;
- to understand barriers and opportunities, and articulate evidence-based policy-making options;
- to understand and support the development of norms and standards, and guidelines and codes of practice;
- to help enhance the standing of the United Nations as an authoritative and responsive source of knowledge.

Successful policy research uptake in the United Nations system depends on the convergence of both internal and external factors that contribute, during the entire research cycle, to the quality and relevance of the final products, as well as on the relationship between the suppliers and the users of research, including non-United Nations protagonists.

Therefore, two distinct issues have to be considered. The first is how organisations produce policy research internally, by enhancing the quality of research, improving staff incentives and rewarding innovative and independent research.

The second area is the actual use by the United Nations system of SDGs relevant research produced externally, by universities and other research entities.

Internal Research Production

The policy research landscape of United Nations system entities is extremely diverse. There are considerable variations in the way organisations comprehend and operationalise research activities. This heterogeneity—inherent to organisations with different internal capacities and budgets—is compounded by programmatic/operational requirements that vary. Some organisations are heavily research-based and oriented towards capacity-building, while others fulfil operational functions.

In some decentralised organisations, the quality assurance for policy research and uptake is not consistent throughout the organisation. The headquarters of an entity may not always be aware of research undertaken at the field level. Limited co-ordination between the former and the country offices (and among technical experts, communication

experts and operating units), can also pose risks to dissemination and uptake, including the fragmentation or duplication of efforts and resources, inconsistencies, and a lack of coherence.

Guidelines and policies on the cycle of production, quality assurance and the dissemination of research, where they do exist, are necessary but not sufficient. Research processes are not always integrated into the strategic outlook of the organisation. The actions for research uptake—intended to ensure that findings are known and validated by a broader audience and have an impact—are not always envisaged in policy research planning.

Most organisations have not successfully determined how to best utilise existing capacities for policy research uptake, although such capacities do exist. Staff exposed to both research and policy roles tend to have a better understanding of the dynamics of policy-relevant research.

However, the insufficiency of internal skills' mapping for uptake leads organisations to seek solutions externally, rather than incentivising and training their own staff. Sometimes, the administrative imperatives prevail over intellectual autonomy.

Use of External Research

The analysis in the first part of this paper demonstrates that the United Nations knew how to use the knowledge produced outside the system. However, the successful cases were associated with major political events (world conferences and summits, anniversaries, etc.). They responded to major but circumstantial imperatives and did not always reflect long term-strategies. That approach fuelled a preference for external consultancy, and limited interest for systematic and continuous research.

Moreover, the United Nations research is disproportionally solicited from and produced by universities and research centres in the Global North, instead of building the national capacities of countries in the Global South.

The United Nations staff is not guided rigorously in the process of finding and using relevant external research, and there is a lack of transparency and openness in the selection of research topics and researchers.

There is an absence of systematic and predictable processes, practices and frameworks connecting the United Nations system and academic communities for research projects regarding the 2030 Agenda.

In conclusion, the contribution of the United Nations system to Agenda 2030 can be optimised by feasible actions with clear purpose, among which:

- Elevation of the representation and the use of policy briefs produced by the specialised research entities in any decision making at the level of the General Assembly or the governing bodies of other entities. No decision on relevant issues, involving use of research, should be taken without making sure that the scientific and statistical assessments are known in advance. On one side, that would imply a better use of the money spent on research. On the other side, the decision makers would be helped to make decisions based on evidence rather than on circumstantial considerations.

- The Economic and Social Council that is mandated by the Charter to co-ordinate the work of the specialised agencies, funds and programmes in economic and social areas, should review and optimise the research agenda of its regional commissions and other subsidiary bodies. In this way, the main contributors would spend the funds made available more efficiently, avoiding duplications and waste, while the United Nations organisations and their implementing partners would work in a more coherent way.

- The level of involvement of researchers from the Global South should be improved by adopting specially designed policies and frameworks expected to stimulate capacity-building for all dimensions of the policy research functions, including uptake at the national level. That would not only attenuate an imbalance but might lead to more efficient and customised local solutions to the problems of development.

- Encouraging long-term partnerships with academic communities and establishing basic guidelines for such partnerships. That would be a mutually beneficial practice and a departure from the *ad hoc* encounters that—even when successful—are neither predictable nor sustainable in the long run.

- The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Director General of UNESCO may consider the creation, on an experimental and voluntary basis, of a United Nations Academic Joint Publication Board, with the task of identifying knowledge gaps at the system wide level and the most efficient ways to produce, disseminate and uptake policy research in a collaborative and participatory manner. That would reduce the excessive use of consultants, eliminate the risk of paying multiple times for the same research products, and increase transparency in all research related activities.

- Establishing a system-wide policy on open data access, supporting software and research-sharing among the United Nation organisations. That would not only reflect the solidarity embedded in the 2030 Agenda, but it would also be a proper

response to the relative lack of resources to produce the research needed for the achievement of the SDGs.

Certainly, there are many more ways to improve and optimise research production and research uptake. I picked just a few, because such measures are implementable at very little, if any, cost. They only need better management of the existing knowledge potential.

Learning in the United Nations System

The largest part of the regular budget of the United Nations, and for that matter of many other organisations, is allocated for staff costs. The figures are not easy to find, the staff costs being absorbed in various programme costs, but we could still identify the trend. As reported by the Joint Inspection Unit in 1984, the share of common staff costs in the United Nations budget rose from 61.2% in 1974-1975 to 65.8% in 1982-1983 (Efimov and Kaddour, 1984). This trend has continued; at present the same share has risen to about 75%.[6]

According to the Charter of the United Nations:

"The paramount consideration in the employment of the staff and in the determination of the conditions of service shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity".

Competency is the capability to apply or use the set of related knowledge, skills, and abilities required to successfully perform work functions or tasks in a defined setting. This suggests that competency is a dynamic concept. The history of the United Nations and its permanent adjustment to the changes in its surrounding working environment suggests that United Nations staff must continuously maintain and improve their skills. All international public servants are expected to be lifelong learners, be ready and willing to learn, to acquire new skills. Both individual staff members and the organisations that employ them must find the best training and development ways, means, and sources.

This was the object of another piece of research done by the Joint Inspection Unit. The conclusions of the report on learning that resulted from that research are quite emphatic:

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[6] Calculated based on the figures presented in the Proposed programme budget for 2023, doc. A/77/6 (Introduction), pp.47-48, 20 May 2022.

- As the main asset of the United Nations system is its staff, learning is an indispensable tool in improving quality and efficiency of its work. Through learning, staff can develop new knowledge and skills, acquire new competencies, and improve behaviours and attitudes. Learning is not optional; it is a *sine qua non* condition for the organisations and their staff to be able to adapt in a highly competitive and dynamic environment (Dumitriu, 2020).
- The changes brought by new technologies and the horizons opened by artificial intelligence (AI) make that conclusion even more imperative: the United Nations system cannot escape the transition to the future of work, implying agility for organisations and continuous learning for individuals. The transformation of the ways we work can only be achieved by further learning.
- For the United Nations system, learning should be used as a transformative force that could break down silos, stimulate inter-agency co-operation, create synergies and increase efficiency in the use of resources, whether from regular budgets or voluntary contributions.

The JIU report found that there was an overall agreement that *learning is strategic*. Nevertheless, the budgetary allocations do not reflect this agreement. Back in 2003, the learning managers of the United Nations system proposed that 5% of staff time and 2% of staff costs should be devoted to learning, as an indicator that reflects its strategic importance. Yet, few organisations meet those targets.

Some organisations take a narrow approach to learning and talent management, one that does not form part of a broader strategy in support of organisational effectiveness and increased competitiveness. When in need of specific skills and competencies, many organisations are driven to implement *ad hoc*, short-term solutions at the expense of developing an holistic talent management system. As a result, the critical dimension of employees' engagement, upskilling and reskilling is undervalued.

At this juncture, I have to insist on the essential piece of this ideal scenario: the need for more engagement and commitment by the staff themselves. The principle that learning is a responsibility shared by the organisation, its managers and each individual staff member is officially and widely recognised in the United Nations. Yet, staff engagement is not satisfactory: it is passive, rather than proactive. Personal undertakings at personal costs are exceptions rather than good practice.

While the responsibility of the organisations and managers is critical in creating an enabling environment for learning and talent development, it is also the duty of individual staff members to seek proactively to enrich their professional skills

throughout their careers. Staff members should commit themselves to continuous learning, including by applying and sharing the skills gained from learning and development activities. They must exit their comfort zone where they wait for the organisation to take the initiative, to propose expensive courses, and to see learning only as a means of enhancing the prospect of their promotion.

The JIU report also found that a comprehensive and systematic focus on inter-agency co-operation was missing despite recent challenges. A new collaborative system-wide culture of learning is simultaneously made necessary and facilitated by two major driving factors: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the opportunities provided by innovative technologies for interactive and continuous learning.

Yet, despite its emphatic holistic and collaborative call, as well as the interdisciplinary and crosscutting nature of its goals, the adoption of the 2030 Agenda was not followed by a drive towards convergence or co-ordination of curricula. On the contrary, learning programmes on the SDGs proliferated with no sufficient concern for coherence, co-ordination or convergence. The fragmentation and unco-ordinated nature of SDG-related learning activities led to the opposite: a proliferation of courses and portals that may undermine the common perception of the United Nations and understanding of the role it is expected to play.

Certainly, many initiatives tend to fix that situation. For example, the on-going UNSDG—Learn initiative, offers on a single platform a compilation of documentary sources, self-pace e-learning courses, micro-learning videos, podcasts and quizzes, recorded webinars, etc. The offer covers all the SDGs, individually or clustered. The providers of information are United Nations entities, individually or in co-operation with others. This proves the increasing awareness of the need for more inter-agency co-operation on learning, but still does not show a pro-active and conscientious co-ordination, in view of the more than 650 options available.[7]

Therefore, in the United Nations system, innovation in learning through the use of new technologies is not an abstract construct. The growing digital infrastructure amplifies the ability of its organisations and their staff to access and use nearly unlimited knowledge capital. The same technologies offer unprecedented networking options; these should be unconditionally used for more coherence, co-ordination and convergence among the United Nations programmes, funds and specialised agencies at the system-wide level. The existing silos may have historical and bureaucratic

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[7] www.unsdglearn.org, accessed on 16 June 2023.

justifications, but their continuation in the current digital era should no longer be tolerated, in particular in the area of learning.

The dynamics and the constant improvement and diversification of technology-supported learning solutions make them indispensable in any strategic planning on learning, whether at the individual or the organisational level. The ability of e-learning to reach a global audience and a widespread workforce is unparalleled and creates a learning environment conducive to agility. For the United Nations organisations, with such a wide geographical distribution, the design and delivery of learning programmes in an e-learning format stimulate networking and capacity to optimise strategies and processes.

The United Nations organisation system should move towards a United Nations system of learning, by following three vectors:

- The first is policy-related: the development of a farsighted and strategic United Nations Organizational Learning Framework at a system-wide level; this should encompass principles and actions reflecting the common values and mandates of all interested United Nations organisations. The Framework should be agreed upon and owned by all of them. That could trigger synergies, prevent duplication and waste of resources and assure a minimum level of inter-agency solidarity so that no organisation would be left behind, however small.
- The second vector is institutional: the upgrading and consolidation of the role of the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) as a system-wide knowledge management and learning institution, through the strengthening of its mandate and the enhancement of its financial means. UNSSC is moving into this direction by its Blue Line offer, defined as a "global learning hub for the UN".[8]
- The third vector is operational in nature: a co-ordinated, more rigorous, systematic and pragmatic use of e-learning platforms, including joint platforms.[9] The face-to-face learning, the interpersonal interaction and dialogue, the spontaneous exchange of views and experience, the human touch remain the best way to learn. However, this is no longer affordable in all situations if one should improve constantly one's knowledge, from an institutional and time resource angle. E-learning is no longer just a cheaper option or a simple alternative to face-to-face or blended courses. E-learning is the most feasible and realistic way to ensure constant transformation

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[8] https://www.unssc.org/the-blue-line.

[9] There is an online learning framework proposed by the United Nations Secretariat that implements the recommendation. See: https://hr.un.org/page/online-learning-framework-toolkit.

and adaptation of the entire workforce of the United Nations and to maintain the relevance, competency, competitiveness, and efficiency of staff in the discharge of their duties.

Knowledge Management

Let us suppose that the absorption of adequate research from external sources and produced internally is adequate. In a theoretic scenario, staff may be well trained to efficiently use the body of knowledge accumulated. Yet, that may not be enough for the effective utilisation of knowledge, both in the organisations and system-wide. To optimise the use of knowledge acquisitions there is a need for *summum bonum* of policies and practices that should ensure the optimum use of such resources.

Another JIU report dealt with knowledge management in the United Nations system, identified good practices and made recommendations for improvement.

At the time of its publication, the report found that knowledge management in the United Nations system was still a work in progress:

> "Knowledge management remains a challenge for the United Nations system organizations in their attempt to systematically and efficiently develop, organize, share and integrate knowledge to achieve their cross-cutting goals. Knowledge management is not yet a strategic priority in all United Nations system organizations and there are no common practices that are accepted or shared system-wide." (Dumitriu, 2016)

At the time of the JIU research, few organisations, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the International Labour Organization (ILO) had comprehensive and time-tested practices, while knowledge management was part of their operational reality.

The review used an *ad hoc* framework to assess the preparedness for knowledge management, based on five criteria:

• The existence of a strategy and/or policy document and/or guidelines aimed at defining, institutionalising and operationalising knowledge management.
• The integration, alignment or programmatic connection of such documents with other strategies and plans of action.

- The explicit attribution of knowledge management-related responsibilities and competencies to various units, managers and staff members.
- The existence of policies aimed at enhancing the proactive engagement of staff in knowledge management.
- The existence of direct or indirect positive impact on the efficiency of the organisation's operations.

Across the United Nations system, there are several knowledge management strategies that have stood the test of time and relevance. Those strategies were developed by organisations that have complex institutional structures at headquarters, regional and national levels. The report concluded that intellectual assets necessary to develop knowledge management strategies existed in many organisations, at headquarters and in the field; these could inspire new initiatives, without resorting to external assistance.

A difficulty in promoting knowledge management frameworks lies in the fact that, unlike other policies that can be justified in terms of explicit and measurable monetary savings, the added value of knowledge management is more difficult to quantify. Measuring the impact of knowledge management has always been a major challenge in designing and implementing specific strategies and policies.

Knowledge management prevents waste of money, time and human resources. Yet one cannot measure what is prevented. It is difficult to quantify the time spent in, or the cost of, finding the right information or reproducing knowledge that already exists or using obsolete instead of up-to-date information, or investing in technology without assessing its potential to improve the availability and accessibility of knowledge.

Overspending money is easily detected, but overspending time is almost neglected. Knowledge management benefits are not achieved directly or overnight. The prevention of errors and the savings that are often achieved through better use and reuse of existing knowledge are practically invisible in accounting terms.

Negative consequences of ignoring knowledge management benchmarks include:

- duplication of efforts and activities by staff working in similar fields;
- inconsistency in the approaches or understanding of the same policy area;
- lack of awareness of the whole picture of a particular policy challenge;
- loss of knowledge and insight when experienced staff leave an organisation;
- insufficient motivation to share best practices and innovations;
- absence of inter-departmental or inter-agency work.

While most of the United Nations system organisations consider themselves "knowledge-based" entities, many managers and professionals tend to focus on explicit and quantifiable knowledge only. Indeed, while well-functioning information, archives and records management systems should be part of effective knowledge management, there is no clear concern about the loss of knowledge in the process, even in the case of *explicit* knowledge. In addition, there is no formal control of the associated repetitive costs. Moreover, there are insufficient policies in place to retain *tacit* knowledge associated with the staff who are subject to various forms of mobility.

An underlying assumption of the JIU report was that knowledge management can be improved within existing resources. Without ignoring the possible need to invest money in knowledge management, the review emphasised the role of human potential as the prevailing factor in knowledge management processes.

Knowledge management is a participative process, in which the personal proactive attitude of knowledge workers—as in the process of learning—is essential. Formal action is a necessary condition, but without conscientious involvement and awareness on the part of staff, a knowledge management system will not produce the expected results.

Knowledge management helps to qualify and identify what the organisation knows, where and in what form the knowledge is located, how organised is the access to it, and what are the best ways to transfer knowledge to the right people at the right time. Organisations can learn from past failures and successes, redeploy and reuse existing assets, solve problems or innovate, foster and develop the right competencies, update and remove obsolete knowledge and ensure that internal knowledge is not lost.

Knowledge management gained importance in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to whose implementation can contribute. Knowledge can break down silos and be the most natural integrative factor system-wide and for all the stakeholders.

The recommendations proposed by JIU followed the structure of the preparedness framework and were aimed at enhancing the role of knowledge management in the service of the 2030 Agenda, by:

- filling the gaps in knowledge management system-wide, based on existing practices;
- valorising human resources and the knowledge acquired by staff in their organisations;
- stimulating common system-wide initiatives.

It seems that the JIU report increased awareness about those aspects. The multiplication of strategies in the United Nations system since 2016 proves that knowledge management can be a very valuable tool, not only for the executive heads of the organisations, but also for the governing bodies.

The message sent by the Joint Inspection Unit reached the main target. Paragraph 70 of the most important resolution of the General Assembly on operational activities reproduced in a nutshell the essence of the JIU report, and referred for the first time in its history to the need for knowledge management strategies:

> "The General Assembly,
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> [...]
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> 70. Calls upon the United Nations development system to introduce or strengthen knowledge management strategies and policies, with a view to enhancing transparency and improving its capabilities to generate, retain, use and share knowledge, and move towards a system-wide open data collaborative approach for a common and accessible knowledge base;" (UN, 2016)

The Secretary-General Antonio Guterres followed the track and, in his most important programmatic report of his first mandate as head of the United Nations, named knowledge management among "*the main areas of support for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals*" (UN, 2017).

The implementation of the JIU recommendations was confirmed by some major United Nations protagonists. For example, UNICEF refers to one of the recommendations as "*the normative background*" of its Global Knowledge Management Medium-Term Strategy (UNICEF, 2020, p.8).

UN Women developed its own strategy where the essential recommendations of JIU are reflected:

> "the implementation of this strategy will allow UN women to transition from ad hoc, uneven and inconsistent Knowledge Management practices to systematic and consistent approaches that create synergies, provide quality assurance and ensure that the best available knowledge and experience throughout the organisation is made available to all UN Women staff anywhere". (UN Women, 2018, p.31)

The examples could continue, but not without mentioning the application of the idea at a regional level by the World Food Programme who developed a knowledge management strategy covering ten countries in Eastern Africa (World Food Programme, 2021).

Knowledge management, claim some authors, is "*the missing piece in the 2030 Agenda*". Well, if that is literally true for the narrative of the Agenda, now we can see that the concept is used in the implementation of its goals and knowledge is treated with the attention it deserves.

CONCLUSIONS

The United Nations continues to be the treasurer of action-oriented knowledge, despite challenges of any nature, such as insufficient funding, intellectual fatigue, lack of strategic foresight, deficit of statesmanship by world leaders, etc. Yet, the United Nations has changed the world in many respects and first and foremost by using its institutional knowledge, enriched and valorised by the moral authority and the values of objectivity and impartiality it embeds.

For decades the UN budgets have shrunk or been frozen. The horizons of the knowledge offered by the United Nations as a global public good continue to expand.

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr Petru Dumitriu is a career diplomat, specialised in United Nations (UN) matters. He earned his doctorate with a thesis on United Nations reform. He was deputy permanent representative of Romania to the UN in New York and Geneva, and Ambassador and Permanent Observer of the Council of Europe to the United Nations–Geneva. Between 2016-2020 he worked with the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations system as Inspector, elected by the General Assembly. He authored, among others, the JIU reports on *Knowledge Management in the United Nations system*, *The United Nations—private sector partnership arrangements in the context of the 2030 Agenda, Strengthening policy research uptake*, and *Policies and platforms in support of learning. Towards more coherence, coordination and convergence*. He received the Knowledge Management Award in 2017 and the Sustainable Development Award in 2019 for his reports. He now works as a senior fellow and lecturer at DiploFoundation.