SHIFTING VISIONS OF DEVELOPMENT: INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, NON-GOVERNMENTAL ACTORS, AND THE RISE OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE, 1945-1990

Conference at Jacobs University Bremen, September 29–30, 2011. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington, the Bremen International Graduate School of Social Sciences (BIGSSS), and the Research Group TEAMs at Jacobs University Bremen. Conveners: Marc Frey, Sönke Kunkel, Corinna R. Unger (all Jacobs University Bremen). Participants: Antoine Acker (European University Institute Florence), Eileen Boris (University of California, Santa Barbara), Jürgen Dinkel (University of Giessen), Jost Düff er (University of Cologne), Leonie Holthaus (Technical University Darmstadt), Ruth Jachertz (Humboldt University Berlin), Vincent Lagendijk (University of Leiden), David Lazar (GHI), Francine McKenzie (University of Western Ontario), Samuel Misteli (University of Lucerne), Jana Otto (University of Hamburg), Corinne Pernet (University of St. Gallen), Claudia Prinz (Humboldt University Berlin), Bob Reinalda (Radboud University Nijmegen), Klaus Schlichte (University of Bremen), Matthias Schmelzer (European University Viadrina Frankfurt/Oder), Daniel Speich (University of Lucerne), Jens Steffek (Technical University Darmstadt), Rainer Tetzlaff (Jacobs University Bremen), Welf Werner (Jacobs University Bremen), Heike Wieters (Humboldt University Berlin), Thomas Zimmer (University of Freiburg).

Over the last sixty years, international organizations and their non-governmental counterparts have played an ever more important role in international politics. They have acted as promoters of globalization, as global transmitters of ideas and knowledge, and as influential stakeholders in a wide range of fields, such as human rights, health, agriculture, labor, demography, and ecology. The growing importance of international institutions has gone along with a similar rise to prominence of the concept of “development,” which — although often lacking a precise definition — has worked as a major catalyst for expanding activities in the international realm.

Historians’ growing interest in international and global phenomena in recent years has brought a rediscovery of the long neglected history of international organizations. A considerable amount of this research has focused on the concept of development, its meanings, and its use by international stakeholders. However, despite efforts by historians, political scientists, and anthropologists alike, there is much territory left to cover in the quest to explain shifting visions of
development and the role of international organizations in shaping the contemporary world. The conference therefore intended to take a systematic look at the state of research and to assess the tasks that still lie ahead in the field.

In the conference’s first panel, Jens Steffek and Leonie Holthaus tracked the rise of international organizations by shedding light on the thinking of two early theorists of international administration. In the interwar years, James Arthur Salter and David Mitrany developed notions of rational public administration and planning that proved to be influential both for political science and for international organizations. Salter, a British diplomat and League of Nations official, and Mitrany, the founding father of the functional theory of International Relations, both endorsed rational planning and transnational administration as means of overcoming political struggles and the danger of political and economic anarchy. Both Salter and Mitrany expected de-politicized governance by functional international organizations to bring about effective political solutions that would spur economic development, among other things. To this end, planning was best left to experts.

The rule of experts was also at the core of Daniel Speich’s paper, which connected the proliferation of international organizations after the Second World War to the concurrent rise of macroeconomics as a scientific discipline. In the 1940s, Speich argued, macroeconomic expertise was established as a generalized medium of communication in international relations, insofar as it provided a shared analytical framework that reduced the complexities of world politics. Thus, economics became a *lingua franca* in diplomatic negotiations that allowed participants to articulate differing interests and to connect diverse backgrounds. Focusing on European-African relations from the 1940s to the 1960s, Speich showed that economic concepts like the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) helped establish new modes of communication in the context of declining empires.

Matthias Schmelzer linked the power of macroeconomics to the conference topic of shifting visions of development by tracking changes in the understandings of the concept of economic growth and by connecting these shifts to parallel changes in development thinking. Schmelzer claimed that the concept of economic growth lies at the heart of modern societies’ discussions about progress and well-being, and that its shifting understandings and meanings closely parallel changing paradigms of the desired path for the development of the
Global South. The debates within the OECD during the late 1960s and early 1970s are an exemplary case of this: The OECD discussions about the need for qualitative and sustainable growth had their counterpart in a critique of dominant notions of industrialization and modernization of the Global South, as well as the subsequent introduction of a new focus on “basic needs” in development thinking.

Economic considerations not only matter in shaping international discourse; they are also important for the “survival techniques” of international organizations, as Heike Wieters showed by looking into the “mindset” of the humanitarian organization CARE. Since its founding in 1945, the New York-based NGO has managed to grow into a significant international player thanks to an entrepreneurial culture that guaranteed CARE’s competitiveness in a challenging environment. The rise of the Western humanitarian community, Wieters demonstrated, was in no small part rendered possible by the fact that nonprofit organizations’ business techniques were not really that different from the ones employed by their for-profit counterparts.

Several papers dealt with the notion of “failure” for international organizations. Francine McKenzie highlighted the emergence of a development agenda in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). “Development” did not figure in GATT’s agenda when it was founded in 1947, but in the 1950s and 1960s, GATT faced increasing criticism from developing countries that sought to change the rules of world trade. Vilified as a “rich man’s organization,” GATT tried to incorporate development concerns into its agenda within its secretariat, but largely failed. The 1964 founding of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development directly challenged GATT’s hesitance to seriously enhance its goals beyond trade liberalization.

Like GATT, the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), one of the oldest of the specialized UN agencies, missed the opportunity to be a leader in promoting development. Ruth Jachertz delivered a bleak picture of FAO’s efforts to fulfill its mandate to combat world hunger and better the lives of rural populations. Far from being able to establish itself as an organization with wide-ranging policy-making functions, FAO became an arena for the North-South conflict in the 1960s. Tensions between G77 countries, which held the voting majority, and OECD countries, which held the power of the purse, led to the lasting paralysis of FAO. The failure of the FAO
secretariat to act as an efficient governing body further contributed to FAO’s decline to an organization that increasingly saw its mandate reduced to publishing reports and statistics.

Vincent Lagendijk’s and Antoine Acker’s papers dealt with ruptures in development thinking by examining the rise in criticism of formerly uncontroversial development visions. Lagendijk looked at growing opposition to dam-building, and Acker analyzed a farming development project run by the Volkswagen company in the Brazilian Amazon region. Dam-building went from being a consensual project and an integral part of the development paradigm to being a contested undertaking from the 1980s onward, when ever more vociferous and better organized opponents started highlighting the potentially damaging consequences of dam-building projects. Similarly, the development of the Amazonian area ceased to be a widely unquestioned vision of progress when, during the 1980s, it became clear that the promise of universal welfare failed to consider the environment and various previously voiceless actors.

A separate panel was dedicated to looking into the way international food and health organizations approached the development concept: Corinne Pernet explored how the Central American Institute of Nutrition (INCAP) acted as a place for the creation and transfer of development knowledge. In the process, she advocated a “de-centered” understanding of development: Governments and international organizations in the Global North should not be seen as sole “senders” of development ideas; instead, the complexity of exchanges and transfers between actors in the “center” and the “periphery” should be seriously considered.

The call for the “de-centering of development” was taken up by Claudia Prinz and Thomas Zimmer. Prinz stressed the importance of multi-directional knowledge transfers in global efforts to control diarrheal diseases during the 1970s and 1980s. The policies of the global Diarrheal Diseases Control Program (CDD) were shaped significantly by the medical knowledge produced by the International Centre for Diarrheal Disease Research in Bangladesh (ICDDR, B), which had been established under the slogan “take the science where the diarrhea is” in 1978. Prinz also showed the benefit of looking into global programs instead of focusing on particular organizations, claiming that the former approach can be rewarding for disentangling interactions and connections in global knowledge production. Thomas Zimmer, for his part, delivered further evidence against the
notion of the Global South being simply an object of project ideas conceived in the West. He illustrated the crucial part Indian actors played in the installation of the Indian branch of the WHO’s global Malaria Eradication Program (MEP) in the 1950s and ‘60s. While the Indian MEP was shaped to fit the Indian government’s agenda, the global program was closely linked to international development discourse: Combating malaria and fighting human suffering was not seen as an end in itself, but as a means to promote economic development through the conservation of a healthy and therefore productive workforce.

The conference’s final panel broadened the view once more, this time to include gender perspectives. Eileen Boris’s paper dealt with the category of “women in developing countries.” In the 1970s, rural women in the Global South became central to development discourse as they were no longer perceived in development thinking as unproductive parts of developing societies but rather as a significant workforce due to a reconsideration of reproductive labor. Third World women became chief targets for the ILO in an effort to end poverty through world employment. Boris sketched the discursive construction of this doubly secluded target group. She also made a general methodological statement by advocating a history of international organizations that is sensitive to how gender makes a difference.

The final discussion stressed the continuing importance of international organizations as facilitators and agenda-setting actors in an interconnected world. At the same time, participants agreed that any analysis of IOs needs to take the larger context into account, such as relations with nation-states, civil society or with knowledge-producing actors. As Bob Reinalda emphasized, one should not forget the role of a beneficial hegemon (the United States) during the founding period of the UN system. In addition, while affirming the lasting significance of international organizations, conference discussions had also exhibited limits to IO agency. Thus, taking up the notion of failure that had surfaced repeatedly during the conference, Sönke Kunkel highlighted the potential for frustration inherent in the transformative promise of international organizations.

Participants agreed further that the concept of “development” and its shifting meanings are as hard to grasp as the forces shaping the role of international organizations in the contemporary world. However, participants identified the scientification of global development as an obvious trend — since various papers had dealt with this phenomenon.
Looking closely into this process may indeed be a rewarding perspective for future research. Klaus Schlichte outlined another possible research path by suggesting that one track the shifting power structures behind perceived changes in development thinking.

In sum, it became clear that two days of fruitful discussions had not been enough to entirely disentangle the highly complex discourses of development thinking and global policy-making. However, all the conference contributions together presented a comprehensive kaleidoscope of a dynamic research field, and exchange among different professions uncovered potentially promising pathways for future research.

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