

P O S T C A R D

23. Inequality: a historical issue within the United Nations System

Richard Jolly

Inequality has been a major concern for the United Nations since 1945. The preamble of the UN Charter reaffirms faith in fundamental human rights and the equal rights of men and women. Article 55 explicitly states that the United Nations 'shall promote higher standards of living, full employment and conditions of economic and social progress and development [with]... universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedom for all' (United Nations, 1945).

Between 1949 and 1951, the United Nations issued three pioneering economic reports – on national and international measures for full employment, for the economic development of under-developed countries, and for maintaining economic stability (Jolly et al., 2009). This choice of themes indicated direct concern for conditions within and between countries in which both inequalities and poverty needed to be reduced, nationally and internationally. After careful analysis, these reports called for measures such as diminishing the high concentration of land ownership, reducing discrimination in banking systems, and prompt counter-cyclical action by the World Bank and the IMF in the event of recessions.

In 1961 the UN General Assembly (GA) adopted proposals for a 'Development Decade'. This set a target for accelerating the rate of economic growth in developing countries between 1961 and 1970 to reach a self-sustaining rate of 5 per cent per year by 1970. This goal was initially dismissed as unrealistic, but it was more than achieved over the 1960s as a whole. Although the resolution made no mention of income distribution, the Secretary-General's accompanying report elaborated the need for 'improvements in internal income distribution' to go hand in hand with growth, if other elements of social progress were to be achieved (United Nations, 1962, p. 9).

Income distribution emerged as a key element in development strategy in the 1970s when the ILO launched a series of country missions, each making country-specific proposals for actions required to deal with unemployment, poverty and lack of employment opportunities. Inequality of income distribution was identified as an important cause of employment problems in all these missions. The Kenya Report (ILO, 1972), which gathered major international attention, contained recommendations for 'redistribution from growth'. This strategy was subsequently generalized in an IDS/World Bank study, *Redistribution with Growth* (Chenery et al., 1974).

By the early 1980s, concern for inequality was largely abandoned, sidelined by rising debt and structural adjustment in many countries and displaced by the ideological triumph of Thatcher-Reaganism. The World Bank and the IMF introduced structural adjustment policies as conditions for receiving loans. Free-market liberalization and the Washington consensus became the dominant influence on most of the countries of Africa and Latin America.

The 1990s brought back inequality as part of three major UN initiatives. The UNDP Human Development Report, launched in 1990, emphasized the importance of tackling extremes of income distribution, nationally and internationally. The 1993 Conference on Human Rights gave a new impetus to international action for human rights, with the creation of a High Commissioner for Human Rights and an Office in support. And the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) in 1995 called on all countries to conduct 'regular national reviews of their economic policies and national budgets to orient them towards eradicating poverty and reducing inequalities' (United Nations, 1995, ch. 2, para 25).

The Millennium Declaration, adopted at the Millennium Summit in 2000, included strong and eloquent words on new global challenges including poverty reduction, but was cautious on inequality. It did state that 'only in societies with the greatest inequalities does growth fail to benefit the poor' (Annan, 2000, p. 21). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) did not include specific reference to reducing inequalities, except in relation to gender.

In contrast, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in September 2015, underlined inequality via specific Goal 10, to reduce inequality within and among countries, while also asserting a general goal to 'leave no one behind'. The targets elaborating Goal 10 emphasized that income inequality in developing countries had increased since 1990 and that more than 75 per cent of the world's population now live in households where income is more unequally distributed. Targets also focused on diminishing extreme inequalities in relation to under-5 child mortality, maternal mortality and people living with disabilities. The targets stressed examples of country success, to emphasize that there is nothing inevitable about growing inequalities (United Nations, 2015).

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■ **Richard Jolly** (UK) is honorary professor at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK and research associate. He was co-director of the UN Intellectual History Project at the Graduate Center, City University New York from 2000–10. He was an assistant secretary general of the United Nations as deputy executive director of UNICEF from 1982–95, and in UNDP from 1996–2000 as principal coordinator of the widely acclaimed Human Development Report. He has written or co-authored many books on development and UN history, including *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice* (Indiana University Press, 2004) and *UNICEF: Global Governance that Works* (Routledge, 2014).