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Not the standard image

In 1971 two Chilean activists – a literary critic and a sociologist – created a cartoon character, Cabro Chico (the 'Little Kid'), to challenge the comic book monopoly of foreign multinationals and poke fun at the opposition to Salvador Allende's democratically elected Popular Unity government. Allende's overthrow in 1973 brought prosperity (for a few) and a tragic seventeen-year dictatorship. In 1971 Allende's opponents already ranged from entrenched economic elites to international development agencies that withheld loans needed for his programmes of mass education and agrarian reform.

In what became an international bestseller, *How to Read Donald Duck*, the same professors-turned-cartoonists reprinted a Disney strip that made the connection between complicit, incompetent elites and unreliable global agencies just as effectively as the exploits of Cabro Chico had. In the strip, smiling to an absurdly masked 'native' leader, a surprised Donald Duck says, 'I see you have an up-to-date nation! Have you got telephones?' The reply: 'Have we gottee telephone? Of course! Only trouble is only *one* has wires! It's a hot line to World Loan Bank!'[1]

The Disney cartoon conveyed a standard image of international development cooperation in many circles, on the libertarian right just as much as on the egalitarian left. That image makes another comic book, drawn a generation later and a continent away, particularly surprising. Kenyan cartoonist Terry Hirst is known for defying his country's land barons, their official protectors, and their foreign friends, including some of the most powerful international development agencies. Yet, in 2003, Kenyans found the familiar faces of Hirst's ensemble (characters who are as beloved in Africa today as Cabro Chico once was in Latin America) welcoming them to a celebration of the ideas of economics Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, ideas widely promulgated by a global aid organization, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), through its annual *Human*

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[1] Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck*, trans. David Kunzle (New York: International General, 1975), p. 50.

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1.1 The major sources of unfreedom

Development Report. In Hirst's *There is a Better Way!* 'development' is not
the business of deluded witch doctors whose magical wires can entangle
their countries into hopeless debt traps. Instead, Hirst draws a democra-
tic chorus to tell us, 'development' means *getting rid of* poverty, famine,
tyranny, and 'most of all, intolerant, repressive government'.[2]

   This book is about UNDP and its approach to development, about the
Programme's origins, its structure and growth, its successes and failures,
and its different roles in different parts of the world. I am an academic, a
sceptic by trade, but I have borrowed my title from Terry Hirst's (albeit
with the addition of the sceptic's question mark) because UNDP's story
is, ultimately, about a *way* of doing something. It is not just a way of
achieving economic development, but also, more broadly, *a way of con-
ducting relations among peoples and nations.*

   On balance, I have come to agree with many of the Programme's
champions who see its way of doing things as fundamentally better than
most of the alternatives. UNDP's champions make three kinds of claim.

[2] Anantha Kumar Duraiappah, Flavio Comim, Davinder Lamba, and Terry Hirst, *There is a
   Better Way! An Introduction to the* Development as Freedom *Approach* (Nairobi:
   International Institute for Sustainable Development and the Mazingira Institute, 2003), p. 4.

First, they argue that the *theory* that has come to underlie UNDP's development practice is superior to other theories of development. That is Hirst's point. This theory is both strategic and it is normative. Today, when UNDP looks for the answers for questions about development, its official (and largely effective) strategy is to 'just ask' the people whom 'development' is meant to serve. Moreover, today, for UNDP 'development' *means* the end of tyranny just as much as the end of poverty, which is the normative point.

Second, those who favour UNDP often contrast the Programme's practice and the theory underlying it to those of other development organizations, claiming that, at many points in time, UNDP has been 'better' than the World Bank, the US Agency for International Development, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, and the like. It would, I believe, be difficult to sustain a claim that the UN Development Programme is inherently superior or that the others have ever been irredeemably worse. After all, these days, most international development agencies see eradicating poverty and fostering substantive democracy as part of their core mission. Nevertheless, UNDP learned many lessons of development before other organizations did, which, one group of historians argues, reflects a larger pattern of the UN being 'ahead of the curve'.[3]

That the UN Programme has often been ahead of the curve is, in part, due to the third, and the earliest, of its claims to know 'a better way', in this case, a better way to conduct relations between nations than what was available before the Second World War, before there was a United Nations.

We are so distant from the Second World War that most of us have forgotten what that original 'better way' was all about. Yet we understand it almost intuitively, even when the argument behind it is presented very quickly, as it was by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in the Senate hearings before her confirmation in January 2005. Rice began her commentary on the unprecedented Indian Ocean tragedy (which had taken place just three weeks earlier) by saying, 'The tsunami was a wonderful opportunity for us.' California's Barbara Boxer chastised Rice for insensitivity,[4] but the senator misunderstood Rice's underlying, sensible point: the outpouring of genuine US concern for the victims of the tsunami – which hit hardest in the Islamist province of the largest Muslim nation,

[3] Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss, *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2001).

[4] 'Transcript of Remarks between Boxer and Rice', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 19 Jan. 2005. http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2005/01/18/RICEBOXER.DTL (accessed 2 June 2006).

Indonesia – would, Rice argued, help to bridge the division between the United States and some of the people that they most feared.

More generally, expressions of solidarity, even with people with whom one disagrees, can contribute to peace. This was a new principle of international relations, a new and 'better way', when it was adopted by the original organization that was called the 'United Nations', the wartime anti-fascist alliance. That 'better way' was then institutionalized in the Marshall Plan and the reconstruction of Germany and Japan following the Second World War. UNDP's story is about the application of the same ideas to relations between wealthy countries and poorer ones, and UNDP's commitment to that idea helps to explain why it has frequently been able to learn about effective means to achieve development sooner than other organizations.

UNDP's history is significant because, more than most of the other institutions founded at the same time, the UN Programme has retained that commitment, and, as Secretary Rice suggested, the hope that international cooperation between the developed and the developing world will foster peace is still very relevant in today's world of terrorism – fuelled, in part, by 'development frustration' (the *in*ability of much of the 'developing' world to achieve the power and wealth of western Europe, North America, or Japan) and nurtured in 'failed states' (development's disasters).

UNDP's story is important not only because the organization embodies this hope and has often been ahead of the curve, but also because it has *always* been at the centre of the global development effort – not the richest organization in its field by a long way, but usually the one that is the most connected to all the rest. UNDP is the direct descendent of the first major, operational international development organization, a Programme that embraced the 'better way' as its development philosophy at the same time as the Marshall Plan began to aid Europe's reconstruction. Thus UNDP's history can help us to make sense of the entire international development enterprise. It is, therefore, a history relevant to all of us simply because development cooperation is our primary way of dealing with one of humanity's greatest problems, our seemingly intractable division into two interdependent and potentially hostile worlds, one of wealth and one of poverty.

The Programme and what it does

UNDP describes itself as 'the UN's global development network, an organization advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge,

experience and resources to help people build a better life'.[5] Its job is to confront poverty, give a voice to the voiceless, and to begin to reverse the growing global economic and political gaps.

Today's UNDP came into being in January 1966 as a combination of two predecessor organizations. One, the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance (EPTA) – under David Owen, the British diplomat who was the first person hired by the post-war United Nations – provided 'technical assistance' to less privileged nations (connecting countries to 'knowledge' useful for development). The other, the United Nations Special Fund – under Paul Hoffman, the American businessman who had run the Marshall Plan – performed surveys and investment analysis to help to identify large, economically feasible development projects (connecting countries to 'resources').

This early development work helped to create institutions and infrastructure fundamental to the transformation of economies, governments, and societies, particularly in newly independent countries. In India in the 1950s the UN network helped to design the campuses and curricula and then to staff the major universities of technology that are now engines of their countries' growth. In the 1970s UNDP followed up by supporting the pilot projects that became India's National Informatics Centre, the world's most complex 'e-government' initiative. In Brazil in the 1960s the Programme financed an unprecedented study of the country's hydroelectric potential by an army of full-time expatriate experts, part-time international consultants, and national advisors. All of the capacity the country has since built – scores of billions of dollars' worth of investment in an essential element of the country's development success – was identified by that one project.

However, UNDP has always been more than just a provider of technical assistance and what was once called 'preinvestment' services. It and its predecessors have provided the most extensive and most consistent presence of the entire UN system throughout the world. The system of UNDP 'Resident Representatives' and country offices in national capitals began more than fifty years ago. (Today the Programme has offices in more than 150 countries.) Most of the UNDP 'Res Reps' have also been charged with coordinating, at a country level, the development work of the entire UN family of organizations, which includes the functionally 'Specialized Agencies' such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and the International

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[5] This standard description appears prominently in recent documents, paper or electronic, including the UNDP home page, http://www.undp.org (accessed 12 Jan. 2006).

Labour Organization (ILO), as well as other major providers of develop-
ment assistance, UNICEF (the UN Children's Fund), the World Food
Programme, and even the Washington-based 'Bretton Woods'[6] agencies,
the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Moreover, in
some countries, UNDP has played an explicit, *de jure* role as the coordina-
tor and promoter of all external assistance, whether from individual gov-
ernments ('bilateral' assistance) or from the international agencies. Even in
countries where UNDP has no responsibility for convening such 'Round
Tables', the office of the Resident Representative often, de facto, becomes
the one place where any harmonization of external assistance can happen.[7]

   UNDP's role in coordinating development work in the field has some-
times been matched with a parallel responsibility to coordinate the devel-
opment activities of the UN family's often fractious headquarters' offices.
Thus, as a result of a long UN reform process, UNDP's recent
Administrators (the title brought by Hoffman from the Marshall Plan)
also chaired the UN Development Group of more than thirty separate
agencies. The last Administrator, Mark Malloch Brown, also spearheaded
the broader programme of achieving eight 'Millennium Development
Goals' adopted in 2000 by all the (then) 189 member states of the United
Nations. These targets include reducing the instance of extreme poverty
by half and eliminating gender disparities in education by 2015.

   UNDP played a part in the origin of many of the agencies that the recent
Administrators have coordinated, and it played a critical role in making
development a priority of most of the rest. This is one of the Programme's
most significant, and least well understood, functions: it nurtures new orga-
nizations with specific roles to play in the process of global development.

   The standard organization chart of the United Nations[8] – a nightmare
to contemplate – includes almost ninety different entities: Specialized

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 6 Named for the New Hampshire resort where the 1944 conference creating the IMF and the
    World Bank took place.
 7 For more than fifty years, in specific situations, the EPTA or UNDP Resident
    Representatives have played the role of the representative, in-country, of all UN agencies, de
    facto and sometimes *de jure*. In this case some of the non-resident agencies reluctantly allow
    the Representative to discharge all of their functions unimpeded, in other cases they are
    given responsibility without authority. This latter sometimes includes those delicate socio-
    economic and political functions that are in the domain of the UN Secretariat. The inter-
    agency support work comes with varied responsibilities, from managing staff and funds to
    overseeing operations and managing the technical issues as well as the programmes of those
    agencies. The Representative is expected to attend all the relevant in-country activities and
    meetings of the non-resident UN agencies.
 8 Organization Chart of the United Nations, http://www.un.org/aboutun/chart.html
    (accessed 12 Jan. 2006).

Agencies, 'departments and offices', 'subsidiary bodies', 'programmes and funds', 'institutes', and 'commissions'. At least one-third of them were nurtured by UNDP. That is, they began as part of UNDP, their development activities were originally funded by UNDP, they are jointly governed bodies controlled in part by UNDP, or they were initially staffed largely by men and women from UNDP.

UNDP and its predecessor, EPTA, dramatically shifted the agendas of many of the original Specialized Agencies by funding their initial development work, work that then became a major focus of every agency, in many cases, its primary focus. Later, new organizations often found temporary homes within UNDP. Some split from the Programme in significant ways, as was the case with UNFPA (the UN Population Fund). Others have remained more embedded within UNDP, but in a variety of ways, as the very different cases of the Capital Development Fund (CDF, which facilitates small-scale investment in the poorest countries), UN Volunteers (UNV), and the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) suggest.

UNDP has also long been a source of new information and ideas about development, including, of course, the ideas underpinning the new development organizations that it has fostered. The Programme publishes annually a global *Human Development Report* that tracks global and national progress relative to a set of indicators of the capacity of people to direct their own lives. It is perhaps even more significant that, over the years, the *Report* has regularly introduced new indicators to help monitor the kinds of issues raised by the democratic chorus in Terry Hirst's comic: eliminating poverty, providing access to clean water, reducing government repression, and the like. The Programme has also sponsored the production of scores of local, national, and regional *Human Development Reports* that have allowed different communities, at all levels, to set and monitor the goals that are relevant to *them*.

The intellectual and social processes that go into making the various *Human Development Reports* are one part of what was once considered a somewhat revolutionary programme of 'advocacy' that UNDP first took on explicitly in 1986. 'Advocacy' in this instance means promoting the concerns of women, the poor, minorities, and other disadvantaged people to the governments of developing countries and their many partners. It also means promoting specific approaches to development – environmental sustainability, working with the private sector, and democratic, participatory, and transparent forms of planning – without turning adherence to them into ideological litmus tests that governments must pass in order to receive UNDP support.

Advocacy was 'revolutionary' only because in the first forty years of the UN's development network under different names, UNDP had become 'the development programme *of* the developing countries', the intergovernmental organization most trusted by governments in the developing world because it was the most responsive to them. UNDP, for example, had assisted both Marxist Cuba and anti-Marxist Singapore. Nevertheless, embracing 'advocacy' actually just made explicit a role that UNDP had long played informally, a role that it could only play successfully because it was trusted throughout the developing world.

In fact, as extensive as any list of official UNDP functions may be, it will not cover many of the important things done by the Programme and its precursors over more than sixty years. Perhaps the most important of UNDP's less official functions has been to act as an incubator not just of other international development organizations, but of states themselves. The staff of UNDP's predecessors helped the United Nations as a whole in its temporary provision of effective government in places like Libya and Congo-Kinshasa. In many of the other newly independent nations of Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean – especially in those abandoned by embittered colonial powers who ripped out telephones and removed typewriters along with their colonial staff – the UN development network did much of the early technical work of government, creating new postal systems, health ministries, civil aviation organizations, and the like. Most significantly, UNDP and its predecessors worked to develop the capacity of nationals of the new states to take over all these tasks as quickly as possible.

This state-building work never completely disappeared from UNDP's portfolio. While it was less common in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, it became central once again in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet system, a decade of financial crises, the emergence of protracted social conflicts no longer contained by the superpowers, and, finally, the violent conflicts and reconstitution of governments that have resulted from the 'war on terrorism'. In this recent era, more than in the era of decolonization, UNDP has directly promoted *democratic* institutions, organizing and helping to set up parliamentary systems, monitoring elections, and supporting the evolution of new political parties and the strengthening of older ones. In 2002, with the creation of UNDP's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, part of this role (when it is performed in the most dire circumstances) was made a central focus of the Programme, while, only slightly earlier, UNDP's explicit concern with 'good governance' evolved into what is, today, the first of six priority areas: 'democratic governance'.

One critical role UNDP has played in state building could be called 'granter of last resort', in contrast to the role of 'lender of last resort' that the Bretton Woods institutions were designed to play so as to help avert global financial crises. UNDP does not lend money to governments. It is neither concerned with the Bank's 'bankable' projects nor with the short-term balance of payment problems that were the original concern of the IMF. Rather, UNDP has provided grants in aid to help with almost everything that contributes to development. Such grants can be especially important to newly democratic states saddled with the enormous debts often accumulated by waning authoritarian régimes. The new governments often cannot get loans; there is a catch-22 to the 'last-resort' loans available from the Bretton Woods institutions: you have to be able to pay back the old government's debt before you can borrow more.

Margaret Joan Anstee (one of the main characters in the early part of the UNDP story) writes about this granter role played by the EPTA in Bolivia after a profound social revolution took place in 1952. Immediately, Hugh Keenleyside (another significant actor in the same era) headed a UN mission to the country. As a result, many UN experts were appointed to key ministries with line functions. 'For Bolivia in the 1950s the contribution of these men (no women!) was a godsend to a government struggling with huge problems, among them the traditionally poor quality of Bolivian public service.' Parts of their salaries were covered by grants provided by EPTA. These were especially critical because the World Bank refused to lend to the government since it had defaulted on its external debt.[9]

Even when democratic transitions are not marked by complex economic and social crises or the threat of violence, UNDP sometimes ends up playing a central role at an even earlier stage. Ravi Rajan, who was Resident Representative in Indonesia during the collapse of Suharto's long-lived authoritarian régime, says that this is because the Res Rep, if also acting as UN Resident Coordinator, is often the only person 'two phone calls away from everyone in the country'.[10] Only one person may stand between the head of the country office and a frightened and besieged leader of the old régime. Yet, at the same time, a Res Rep can also be 'two phone calls' – or, more probably, one phone call and an exhausting drive over bad roads – away from many of the leaders who now have

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[9] Margaret Joan Anstee, *Never Learn to Type: A Woman at the United Nations* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), p. 177.
[10] Ravi Rajan, interview with the author (CNM), 4 June 2004.

the support of a disgruntled population. The Res Rep is likely to have their trust as well, due to the record of UNDP advocacy (however quiet) and due to the impact of projects that have helped the country's least advantaged. A wise and unpresuming Res Rep can use the power temporarily created by his unique position – and by the United Nations' access to a wide range of emergency equipment, resources, and expertise – to help the country towards a more peaceful and democratic future. Many heads of UNDP country offices have done just that, especially in the last ten years, even though they would be hard-pressed to point to that role in their job descriptions.

Sally Timpson, who worked in increasingly influential positions within UNDP from 1967, points out that helping countries towards a more peaceful and democratic future has been as much a matter of offering some protection for democratic forces when authoritarianism is in the ascendant as it has been one of facilitating peaceful transitions and elections when dictatorships are weakening. Much of Timpson's career focused on Latin America. Her first decade in UNDP was a time when many of the region's populist or democratic governments were replaced by means of a coup. (Chile's story is far from unique.) This was also the era of 'disappearances' – non-judicial, government-sponsored kidnappings and murders used to control dissidents. As a matter of compassion and, initially, in a purely incremental way, some UNDP staffers took on a long-term task that Timpson calls the 'recycling' of many democratic political leaders and professionals connected to the governments that had been toppled. Country offices and staff at UNDP headquarters in New York helped many Latin Americans find jobs in the UN system and, in many instances, saved their lives. Some officials received grants for education abroad or became UN experts providing technical assistance or joining research teams in relatively safe countries like Costa Rica or Mexico. Others found more permanent employment in the Specialized Agencies.

As a result, in many Latin American countries when the authoritarian grip loosened in the 1980s the people who could make the democratic state work effectively were available to cycle back.[11] UNDP played a role in this second phase of 'recycling' by helping the new democratic governments bring back many of the professionals who had been forced to flee. Programme officers helped to provide the bureaucratic means and the funds for the renewed democracies to attract and keep the needed personnel.

[11] Sarah Timpson, interview with CNM, 8 Aug. 2004.