The United Nations Development Programme is the central network co-ordinating the work of the United Nations in over 160 developing countries. This book provides the first authoritative and accessible history of the Programme and its predecessors. Based on the findings of hundreds of interviews and archives in more than two dozen countries, Craig Murphy traces the history of the UNDP’s organizational structure and mission, its relationship to the multilateral financial institutions, and the development of its doctrines. He argues that the principles on which the UNDP was founded remain as relevant in a world divided by terrorism as they were in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, as are the fundamental problems that have plagued the Programme from its origin, including the opposition of traditionally isolationist forces in the industrialized world.

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THE UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

A Better Way?

CRAIG N. MURPHY
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While the United Nations Development Programme has been a significant player in the field of international development for more than forty years, its evolution is not widely known nor easily understood. This is the organization's first published history. It is only one of many possible histories of UNDP that could have been written, and is not an organizational history in the traditional sense. My predecessor, Mark Malloch Brown, who commissioned this project, wanted the book to be a work of genuinely independent scholarship, hence, it is in many ways more essay than chronicle. It could not have been written without the help of many people who have been part of UNDP, who contributed their experiences and insights, knowing full well that what the author would eventually write might be very different than what they would have.

Professor Craig Murphy tells the story building on a truly impressive amount of research and lets an overarching theme emerge. The central argument of the book is that UNDP has increasingly become a learning organization, an approach which may provide models for the larger reform of the United Nations. The key aspect of UNDP's learning achievements has been the wonderful creativity and abiding commitment of the people who work for it. The overwhelming majority of UNDP staff have been people who passionately believe in the goals of the organization, individuals who have overcome daunting obstacles – and often the conventional wisdom of the day – to develop hundreds of initiatives, many of which are cited in this book, as well as countless others. In most cases these initiatives have not been something UNDP staffers have been told or even encouraged to do from Headquarters; indeed, had they required prior approval by some kind of intergovernmental council, they would likely never have happened. Such creative results came about because UNDP has attracted people who not only believe in what they do, but who have been able to be creative in times of crisis, and been willing to put themselves on the line (and had the freedom to do so). In essence, the history of UNDP is about these numerous individuals who come up
with smart ways of dealing with situations for which there are no precedents. In the end, a 'better way' consists primarily of finding and attracting these kinds of people; without that, it isn’t possible to understand UNDP.

A second major theme of the book relates to how UNDP has creatively engaged in the promotion of democracy – including the democratic legitimacy of international institutions – at the same time as it has served the nation states that make up the United Nations. It is a theme I have argued for elsewhere as being essential for the UN as a whole.

This book reflects our shared commitment to the development of ideas, policies and institutions which contribute to human development and help build a fairer world for all its people. It is my hope that its insights contribute to addressing the many challenges we face, both within the UN system and beyond.

Kemal Dervis
UNDP Administrator
I am indebted to UNDP’s past Administrator, Mark Malloch Brown, who hired me to write this history. He offered the unbeatable combination of complete scholarly freedom and final editorial control along with a good salary and travel budget, a small but exceedingly qualified staff, unimpeded access to all of UNDP’s materials, and the cooperation of the entire organization. I am grateful to Malloch Brown’s successor, Kemal Dervis, who maintained that incomparable support (and wrote the book’s generous foreword).

The book benefited from the insight of those who have worked on this task before. Many UNDP staffers have written invaluable memoirs of their careers. Others have undertaken histories of specific parts of the Programme’s past. Three other people have attempted a task similar to mine, the late Thomas W. Oliver, whose careful manuscript was never published, Pranay Gupte, who combined part of his work into a broader study, and Ruben Mendez, whose major study is greatly anticipated. Gupte, Mendez, and Oliver’s widow, Marianna Oliver, have been very generous to me in sharing earlier histories and all their insight.

The research and writing of this book took place over an intense twenty-two months, from June 2004 to March 2006. I am grateful to Wellesley College, its president, Diana Chapman Walsh, its dean, Andrew Shennan, and the endowment of the M. Margaret Ball Chair in International Relations for giving me leave so that I could take on the task full-time and for funding some necessary research assistance and travel that UNDP could not provide.

I was blessed with a wonderfully competent international staff of people half my age whose nationalities and work experience made Cambodia, Chile, China, India, Iran, and Mali places against which my interpretations of UNDP’s history were constantly challenged.

Neysan Rassekh assisted me throughout, arranging travel, managing the office and budget, and communicating with the large Advisory Panel and Readers’ Group set up by Malloch Brown. Neysan conducted archival
research at two sites, substantive interviews in a number of cities, and sometimes acted as my unofficial translator in Farsi, French, Spanish, and Chinese. All that work went well beyond his official job description. The project could not have been completed without him.

From February to July 2005 I had the full-time research assistance of Elizabeth Mandeville, whose research skills are unsurpassed. Liz’s diplomacy and editorial finesse are reflected in every chapter of the book. Like Neysan, she worked far beyond her remit. She became my most important critical reader and the person I relied on most to help think through the complex parts of UNDP’s story. By the end, we had thousands of pages of interview transcripts and research notes, yet Liz retained a clear picture of everything we had learned and, therefore, was ready and able to challenge any of my hasty conclusions that did not fit the facts.

Many of those thousands of pages of notes were created by one of four part-time undergraduate research assistants, each of whom worked with us for seven or eight months: Lawrence Chow and Stephen Liou from Columbia University, and Katie Ellis and Roopal Mehta from Wellesley College. I am grateful to them all, especially to Roopal, who took on some of Liz’s tasks in the last months of the project.

During many of my research trips, I was accompanied by colleagues who offered invaluable help, insight, and companionship. At different times both Neysan and Liz played that role, but I am particularly grateful to those friends who sacrificed work and time with family to join me: Robert Collini, Taylor Mendelsohn, and especially Siti Nurjanah, who made the book’s final chapter possible.

In many countries friends who are deeply involved with development, but who have no particular connection to the UN or UNDP, gave me invaluable assistance, including Nurjanah and her husband Christopher Candland (in Indonesia), Florian and Gerdes Fluerant (in Haiti), Victor Gbeho (in Ghana), Esmail Moshiri (in Iran), Paolo Navone (in Burkina Faso), and Diana Tussie (in Argentina).

I am grateful to the many people within UNDP who gave me advice and feedback, especially Malloch Brown and Sakiko Fukuda-Parr. Nada Al-Nashif, Samuel Nyambi, and Mark Suzman also gave extremely important feedback and guidance throughout. At the beginning of my research, they, along with Rafeeuddin Ahmed, Bruce Jenks, and Tim Rothermel were particularly helpful in suggesting ways to approach UNDP’s story. I am also deeply grateful to the formally constituted Readers’ Group who read every chapter: Margaret Joan Anstee, Garth ap Rees, Robert England, Norma Globerman, Luis Maria Gomez, Trevor...
Gordon-Somers, Jean-Jacques Graisse, Michael Gucovsky, Denis Halliday, Zahir Jamal, Basem Khader, Ian Kinniburgh, Carlos Lopes, Khalid Malik, Jan Mattsson, Brenda McSweeney, John Ohiorenuan, Marta Rueda, and Sarah Timpson. Sir Robert Jackson’s biographer, James Gibson, also commented on many chapters, at the suggestion of Dame Margaret. Having the input of this group was like participating in a year-long seminar on the history of development with some of the greatest living authorities. The book is much stronger for their attention.

My academic colleagues, Candland, Peter A. Haas, Eric Helleiner, Joel Krieger, and Rorden Wilkinson, gave me thorough critiques of different draft chapters and constantly reminded me of the connections between UNDP’s story and the larger issues of development and international relations. I am grateful to them and to Wilkinson, Donna Lee, and Thomas Diez, who gave me the opportunity to receive feedback on my work in progress at the University of Birmingham and to others who arranged similar presentations: Judy Dushku at Suffolk University, Randall German at the Patterson School, Carleton University, Nasrin Mosaffa at the Center for Human Rights Studies, University of Tehran, Douglas Nelson at the Murphy Institute, Tulane University, Tim Shaw at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Ole Jacob Sending at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Allison Stanger at Middlebury College, Diana Tussie at the Latin American School for the Social Sciences in Buenos Aires, Peter Uvin at the Fletcher School, Tufts University, and Thomas Weiss at the Ralph Bunche Institute, City University of New York.

Weiss also co-directs the UN Intellectual History Project, as does his colleague, Richard Jolly. I am deeply indebted to both of them for letting me use materials collected by the Project, for help in conceptualizing, carrying out, and reporting my own research, and for their recommendation of me to UNDP. They are the models for all of us who are attempting to understand the UN’s role in the world.

My editor at Cambridge University Press, John Haslam, also provided excellent feedback. I am obliged to him, to the copy-editor, Philippa Yougman, and to everyone at the Press who produced the book so quickly and so well.

Unless otherwise acknowledged, the photographs throughout the book came from various UNDP offices or the UN Secretariat. I am grateful to all of those who helped me find them.

An author always relies heavily on an intimate network, especially to get through the lonelier parts of the process. I am grateful to my close
friends (some of whom have already been mentioned) and to my family, to Max (who insisted on being the second cat acknowledged in a major UNDP study) and most especially to my wife, JoAnne Yates, who, as always, sustained me throughout with her love, humour, and good sense. (She did this despite the fact that, in Boston, January 2005 was the snowiest month on record and I was away in Africa.)

Finally, my greatest debt is to everyone from UNDP and its many partners who gave me their time and support. They trusted me with writing a history that actually belongs to them, knowing that the story I would tell would be partial and incomplete, only one of the many histories of the Programme that could be written and that will be written.

The project involved archival research, extensive interviews, and consultation of materials written by many UNDP staff members. I am indebted to those we interviewed, those who helped us to arrange the interviews, those who helped us in various libraries and archives throughout the world, and the staff members who provided both research materials and guidance. I am sure that we will fail to name many of the people who helped. I apologize for that oversight, but wish at least to acknowledge the following:

Acknowledgements