

History Project Research Report by Eva-Maria Muschik

My dissertation focuses on United Nations development assistance efforts between 1945 and 1965. The receipt of a research grant funded by the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking provided me with the crucial means to visit the UN Archives in Geneva (UNOG) in February 2015. I initially planned to examine the UN Technical Assistance Board (TAB) records, as the TAB was the meeting place for the heads of the UN specialized agencies (the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization etc.) where UN assistance policies were decided. The inventories I consulted prior to my departure indicated that the UN Geneva archives held material related to TAB. However, once on site, it became clear that the material available mainly related to the years 1951 - 1952, rather than the whole of TAB's history. Furthermore, the records consisted mostly of country reports, requests for assistance and summaries of assistance agreements rather than the summaries or minutes of TAB meetings that I had hoped to find in order to learn more about the decision making processes of that body.

Nevertheless, I found ample material at UNOG to fill different gaps in my dissertation chapters. For example, the country reports mentioned above are extremely valuable for the case study of my first chapter, which focuses on UN assistance to Bolivia in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In Bolivia, the UN sought to go beyond merely giving expert advice to national governments by placing so called "administrative assistants" within the national administration to ensure a degree of governmental stability and see to the sound implementation of development schemes. This arrangement was highly controversial as it was seen by many as infringement of national sovereignty and as meddling on part of the UN in the internal affairs of a member state, which was explicitly prohibited by the UN Charter. Based on the personal papers of UN officials I have thus far examined, I know that a

compromise was ultimately worked out that proved acceptable to both critics and supporters of the arrangement, which was reformulated after a revolutionary government took power in Bolivia in 1952. The UN country reports and assistance agreements for Bolivia, which I found at UNOG, provide valuable details on the envisioned functions of these administrative assistants and, more importantly, on the extent and the limits of their power, both before and after the reformulation of the arrangement.

In other files at UNOG, I found interesting material about attempts to evaluate UN assistance programs. Whereas recent scholarship has identified an interest in evaluation of development projects as a growing concern of the development community in the 1970s, the material found at UNOG testifies to the fact that there was an interest in appraising existing assistance programs from as early as the 1950s.¹ UN officials found, however, that the range of assistance programs was so wide that any evaluation of their effectiveness in relation to economic development in concrete terms was difficult if not impossible. These documents thus also demonstrate that 1950s development programs – at least in the realm of the UN – were much less focused on economic growth than it is usually posited in the secondary literature.

The papers of a 1953 UN/ UNESCO conference on “Social Aspects of Technical Assistance Programmes for Economic Development”, held at UNOG, similarly testify to a rather broad conception of development, as a field in which “the human element” was often forgotten. One paper for example, stressed the findings of a Carnegie study, which suggested that the success of any assistance program depended 87 percent on ability in human relations and only 13 percent on technical skill. Another paper attacked the idea of assistance programs

¹ Michele Alacevich (2014). VISUALIZING UNCERTAINTIES, OR HOW ALBERT HIRSCHMAN AND THE WORLD BANK DISAGREED ON PROJECT APPRAISAL AND WHAT THIS SAYS ABOUT THE END OF “HIGH DEVELOPMENT THEORY”. *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 36, pp 137-168.

providing straightforward technological fixes imported from abroad, drawing attention to how seemingly simple interventions caused unintended changes in the local social structure. Thinking along similar lines, another paper urged that resistance to development projects should be taken seriously and studied rather than viewed as obstacles to overcome by all means.

The material found at UNOG makes clear that development hierarchies in the early years of UN assistance were less set in stone than historians had previously thought. European countries were as much recipients of UN assistance as countries that are today considered “the developing world.” Indeed, at the first meeting of the TAB, the question of how to define “under-developed” countries, which were to be the official recipients of UN assistance, was postponed to a non-specified date and – to my knowledge – not taken up again. It was only in the late 1950s, that European requests for UN assistance were increasingly turned down in favor of those “countries and territories whose low level of economic development made their need for technical assistance most urgent.” Even if this was still a very vague formulation, from that point on, the European branch dealing with UN assistance increasingly fashioned itself as a clearing-house for expertise, a donor rather than a recipient of aid.

As I was able to go through the relevant files at UNOG more quickly than I expected, I took the opportunity to visit the ILO archives on my last day in Geneva. At the ILO Archives, I learned more about the “pre-history” of the UN assistance mission to Bolivia, mentioned above. The far-reaching arrangement negotiated for Bolivia under UN auspices in the late 1940s built on the experience of participants of that mission with previous ILO missions to Bolivia and the concern that the country “had already been advised to death.” Consulting the ILO archives allowed me to examine those earlier ILO interventions and

provided perspective on the UN' choice to favor measures stronger than advice to ensure development.

Finally, visiting Geneva gave me a chance to discuss my research with preeminent scholars in the field, namely Professors Davide Rodogno, Sandrine Kott, and Daniel Speich, to receive critical feedback on my project, and to learn more about related research projects and conferences.