

The Strategy Smokescreen

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Ambassador Ernst Michanek was the Director General of the Swedish International Development Authority from 1964 to 1979. Previously he was Under-Secretary of State for Social Affairs. In a lifetime of development, he served as Swedish delegate to ESOSOC 1951-1953 and from 1957-1960 on the Governing Body of the ILO. In these and other similar roles he has been involved in the elaboration of all of the UN's Development Decades the First in the 1960s, the Second in the 1970s and the Third Development Decade likely to be established next year. In this article he takes a hard look at the basic concept.

Will a global strategy for development in the 1980s help the poor of the earth liberate themselves from their poverty?

I think not.

I can see nothing that could reasonably be said to prove, or make likely, that the United Nations' international "Development Decade" strategies or similar declarations of a general character have influenced actual world development in the 1960s and the 1970s. Possibly, these strategies have contributed to the disappointment, particularly with the UN system, that now exists in many quarters. Probably, they have been of little consequence because they remain largely unknown.

If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, we have now had enough. As I see it today, we got more pudding than strategy. The revolutionary strategists—and I was among them—did not move the main forces of development.

MILESTONES

The quasi-military vocabulary is warranted, because the world is involved in a war of liberation. In a global perspective, the decisive phase of that war may be said to have begun at the end of World War II, with the gradual dissolution of the colonial empire. National decolonization as such took around three decades. You may see India as the first milestone, Zimbabwe and Namibia symbolizing the last milestone on that particular road. But that is only the first act.

The great positive importance of the United Nations in this process is beyond doubt. But the liberation war continues. The freedom forces set out for much more than the political independence of states. On that grey battleship somewhere out in the Atlantic Ocean, when in 1941 the Western powers outlined their postwar goals, four freedoms were proclaimed as the aims of the struggle: freedom from

want, from hunger, from ignorance and from fear.

The social, economic, cultural and political aims of the United Nations were enumerated in article 55 of the Charter of 1945. And in article 56: "all members pledge themselves to take joint and separate action" for these purposes. The constitutions of the UN specialized agencies specify the goals. Using their own words, we could say that the modifications to the ILO constitution made in 1944 were themselves a declaration of war against want—they were preceded already in the 1919 ILO's constitution by the "peace through justice" proclamation. In the same category come FAO's legal foundation, the freedom from hunger declaration of 1945 and UNESCO's basic text of 1946, the eradication of illiteracy.

Among the many ensuing calls upon all states to "unite in a sustained effort" may be mentioned the First Development Decade declaration of 1961, aimed "to break through the cycle of poverty, hunger, ignorance and disease".

In the 1970s, these texts have proliferated. The population explosion, demonstrating day-by-day the necessity of joint action for mankind's survival, has been accompanied by a parallel proclamation explosion.

Headings and preambles have become more and more forceful. In the 1974 declaration and programme of action on a new international economic order, for example, the United Nations members solemnly proclaim their determination to work urgently for the same aims as before...

With due respect and deep regret, I cannot help sighing: let us not deceive ourselves. Paper tigers are dangerous only to those who conceive them.

This outburst does not imply that the United Nations should not be used for the aims in question. The cry is against the inflationary

misuse of such tactics. This is an important reason behind frequent abuse of the UN for alleged ineffectiveness. Such tactics should be used sparingly if they are to remain effective.

The targets of the general "strategies" of development, insofar as they can be measured against reality—and insofar as their attainment has depended in any way upon international action—have not been reached. The best illustration is probably the established fact that the gap has been widening and still widens between the rich and the poor; that today there are more hungry and ignorant and endangered children and men and women than ever before and that their numbers are not decreasing; that the target of international assistance is more distant from implementation than when it was formulated. This statement in no way belittles the efforts made, the difficulties encountered or the positive results achieved. It simply says that the strategies have not been followed by the action that they presuppose—and that therefore they may have been useless or even counterproductive. I cannot remember having met one developing country spokesman who has referred to them as of important to his country's planning or performance.

I am not against planning, nor against plans leading up to targets. As a "half politician" and public servant for more than three decades, I have worked to achieve specified social goals—namely, by planning and opinion-making and planning again that lead to concrete long-term commitments for the implementation of the programmes.

Sweden's recent history—like that of several other countries—is full of such undertakings. Plans to build up a social security network, aimed at creating "freedom from fear" for all citizens, have been made and implemented, revised and restructured. Action programmes for "full employment", "housing for all", "health for all" have been made, costed, financed and implemented step-by-step over many years. The "eradication of illiteracy" belongs to past history. The names of the programmes just quoted embrace universal targets that may, in fact, never be fully met in a literal sense. Such target formulations—like "fundamental freedoms for all" in the UN char-

ter—may nevertheless be useful insofar as they constitute social rights of the individual who in an open society can request the fulfilment of the right not only in principle but in the individual case.

SWEDEN AND AID

My most interesting experience in 'targetry' from an international point of view has been in the field of development assistance. Sweden voted in 1960 and 1961 for the first United Nations resolutions recommending a flow of resources as aid to developing countries, the amount of which should correspond to one per cent of the national income of the developed countries. On the basis of a full public debate and a number of studies on the matter, parliament asked the government for action, and in 1962 a decision on the principles of an aid programme was taken, followed by substantial budgetary increases for activities in development co-operation and the build-up of an administrative structure. In 1968 the previous discretionary and non-systematic annual increases in spending were followed by a detailed seven year plan for the gradual, orderly attainment of a one per cent target for budgetary allocations to 'official development assistance' (actually a more ambitious target than that of the UN).

The plan was unanimously adopted by parliament—after voting down the request of one party for a plan that would have implied reaching the target faster, namely in five years instead of seven. That request for a more ambitious policy in favour of the poor countries was supported not least by youth demonstrations (as you remember, 1968 was a lively year in many countries). The particular aid plan of 1968 was actually implemented in eight years, the 'oil crisis' being one excuse for the year delay. That delay, however, was bitterly opposed in parliament and the press with reference to 'our promise to the developing countries'. Sweden was still the first country to reach the target contained in the United Nations International Development Strategy for the 1970s, specified as 0.7 per cent of each rich country's GNP for transfer as official development assistance. Not a single voice in parliament, has ever been raised against the implementation of this undertaking which followed from the United Nations vote for the strategy resolution. However, it

takes much more than a UN resolution to provoke a multi-billion dollar decision by the Swedish Parliament. But that is another story.

The lesson is, however, that a strategy worth the name deals with the goals to be reached, the main ways to reach them and the forces to be used. A strategy requires not only a strategist to write it but a supreme command and suitable forces to mobilize—and the decision to carry the strategy through. The UN has an intellectually high-powered committee for the purpose (or several) — but what else does it have?

Development is for people and by people. If anything has been learnt from the last few decades, it is that economic and social development cannot be isolated from each other, so, any planning begins with people—their needs, their aspirations, their capabilities of working for the improvement of their lot. In the present situation, anti-poverty policies have to be given priority. Societies with too glaring gaps cannot survive. In other words, in poor countries development planning has to begin with the items that people themselves begin with when they build up their own livelihood in a non-industrialized society; these are water, land, food, sanitation, shelter, knowledge. Targets should be formulated based on the ambition to provide freedom from poverty for all. A number of United Nations special conferences in recent years have made exercises in target formulation for poor countries and poor people everywhere: water for all, health for all, employment for all, a sound environment, knowledge of family planning for all and means to practice it, and so on. Knowledge to read and write and to count seems to me—on the basis also of the Swedish experience—to be of such fundamental importance for advancement in all other fields of human activity, that I cannot understand UNESCO's present unwillingness to push it as the top priority of all development endeavours.

Such targets, formulated for each country's specific situation, should be calculated in relation to physical resources and reasonable standards: cost-estimated and time-planned. Here the United Nations can be of great service to its members. Experiences from other countries' failures and successes should be made known—not just general statistics or the polish-

ed success-stories from the technical assistance treasury. Lessons from neighbouring poor countries should be taught through special subregional endeavours. The UN organizations could get resources for such services to poorer countries by decreasing the production of repetitive resolutions, shortening and dropping conferences—there are said to be 9,000 of them this year—and by concentrating on fewer items. This would also decrease the work load on hundreds of national ministries and would help them provide for higher quality in their participation. Recently in Manila, another 'strategy-like' lengthy resolution emerged from UNCTAD V. It repeated a series of similar texts from earlier years calling for a substantial new programme of action for the least developed countries' development in the 1980s, with particular reference to their most pressing social needs. These countries are called upon to plan ambitiously for their own endeavours. At the same time the resolution says that serious plans can be made and implemented only if there is assurance that substantial additional resources are committed from outside.

In my opinion, the likelihood of such assurances (on top of the expected decision to replenish the World Bank IDA funds) is next to nil, whatever resolutions may be voted. However, if the poorest countries, in collaboration with UN bodies, and making use of the material from the UN special conferences of the 1970s, give priority to the most obvious social needs of their poor, and begin to implement such programmes, their request for external resources should not pass unnoticed. On the basis of such specified programmes for individual countries, some UN body could make aggregate projections in order to see where groups of countries and the world as a whole seem to be moving. Starting from that material, a discussion on priorities could follow which might result in some kinds of 'strategic' statements on bottlenecks and possible solutions.

To apply once again the method of overall projections, followed by general so-called strategies and then requests for unspecified support for the economies of poorer countries will produce no tangible result.

The United Nations must do better than produce dead letters. The world has had enough of them.