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The United Nations *and ECLAC* at the half-century mark *of the Organization*

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I

Fifty years ago, a broad and representative group of countries tried for the second time in this century to set up a world organization to try to banish the scourge of war and promote international co-operation. The first attempt—the League of Nations—had foundered in the stormy waters that were to lead to the greatest cataclysm in world history. The second effort—the United Nations—has so far resisted different but equally severe trials, notably the so-called “Cold War”.

Completing fifty years of existence is indeed a major landmark for any human enterprise, and it inevitably prompts us to reflect on our achievements and shortcomings, above all in the case of the United Nations, which has been the subject of so much controversy, especially in recent times. The analyses of its performance currently being made range all the way from biting criticism to passionate defence, but there tends to be general agreement on at least one thing: the world we live in would be a very different place if the United Nations Charter had not been signed in those far-off days.

The Organization's defenders point to its concrete achievements in various fields, ranging from peace-keeping operations to vaccination campaigns, and including such varied items as humanitarian assistance, the establishment of common standards for transnational activities, support for elections in infant democracies and, of course, technical cooperation programmes to further development. Its detractors, on the other hand, tend to contrast the Organization's real achievements during its first fifty years of existence with the possibly Utopian expectations cherished by its founders, or else they concentrate their salvos of criticism on the alleged inefficiency and ineffectiveness of an Organization which they claim is already hidebound and devoid of flexibility. There are also some who have never lost their fear of multi-lateral schemes because of their real or supposed inhibition of national sovereignty, the most radical expression of such fears being represented by those who vociferously reject the “World Government” which they claim the Organization stands for.

Be all that as it may, this is undoubtedly a very suitable occasion not only for taking stock of the Or-

ganization's performance during its half-century of life but also for reflecting on the course it may follow in the next fifty years. Such reflection may be based on the assumption that a constant factor in the institutional activities of the United Nations will continue to be the paramount importance attached to the central objectives of the Organization: "To maintain in-

ternational peace and security", "To develop friendly relations among nations", "to promote social progress and better standards of life", and "to encourage respect for fundamental freedoms for all", since these express universal values that can hardly be opposed, as they never lose their validity and cannot give rise to major disagreement.

II

The discrepancies that exist tend rather to arise in three other major areas. The first of these concerns the adaptation of the Organization's objectives (or ends) to the present-day context; the second refers to the way responsibilities are shared between the Secretariat and member governments, and the third involves the efficiency and effectiveness (the means) displayed in seeking to achieve the proposed goals. I shall now deal briefly with each of these topics in turn.

1. The ends of the United Nations

With regard to the first aspect, there are some who hold that as the risk of a new world war has allegedly disappeared thanks to the end of the "Cold War", the main justification for the United Nations' existence no longer exists. The opposite theory would seem to be much more convincing, however: in a world where virtually all human activities have transnational dimensions, there is an obvious need for a universal organization to aid in the orderly settlement of potential tensions or conflicts of a multinational nature (or, as the case of Bosnia shows, national confrontations with multinational repercussions) and in the organization of joint action to remedy them, preferably within the context of international cooperation. Thus, the United Nations will continue to offer a possibly unique meeting-point where the nations of the globe can consider an ever-wider range of issues, inspired by the basic idea that one country's problems can very well spread to its neighbours, whereas international cooperation will foster the spread of benefits to all.

There are two arguments that support the idea that the purposes of the United Nations have been overtaken by events. One argument holds that the Organization should limit its field of action to peace-

keeping, the defence of human rights, the consolidation of the international rule of law and, perhaps, humanitarian assistance, with all other aspects and issues of cooperation being left to various multilateral agencies, especially those set up as a result of the Bretton Woods Conference. Indeed, a step has already been taken in this direction with the establishment of the World Trade Organization outside the United Nations system. The second argument maintains that most cross-border issues—whether political or economic—are now usually of a regional rather than a global nature, so that—it is suggested—the regional institutions should be strengthened rather than the United Nations (Commission on Global Governance, 1995, pp. 149-153 and 286-291).

The idea of making the United Nations a more specialized body, either in terms of subject-areas (political aspects would be considered acceptable areas of action, but not economic and social issues) or in geographical terms (global aspects would be suitable areas of activity, but not regional ones), is not very convincing either. As the Secretary-General so rightly points out in his proposal entitled *An Agenda for Development*, political and economic phenomena, democracy and security, human rights and material well-being are issues which are now inseparable from one another. His own concept of development therefore comprises five "dimensions": peace, the economy, the environment, social justice and democracy (United Nations, 1994a and 1994b).

If we accept the Secretary-General's proposition that the main causes of conflicts in the world are "economic despair, social injustice and political oppression" (United Nations, 1992, p. 9 and United Nations, 1995), then it is clear that the United Nations cannot renounce its right and duty to intervene in all those dimensions. In the final analysis, it is the only multilateral body capable of integrating transnational

phenomena of a political nature with those of an economic and social character. It is not a question, therefore, of limiting its action to the political field but of selecting the economic and political activities to be tackled selectively and in line with the current priorities. The distribution of tasks among the various multilateral bodies should therefore be viewed in terms of the complementation of each one's activities with those of the others, according to their respective mandates and comparative advantages.

Following the same line of thought, although it is true that regionalism is a powerful force in the world of today, this movement should be complementary to, and not a replacement of, the establishment of orderly global relations and cooperation among nations. Indeed, just as regionalism can be a phenomenon which furthers the attainment of the great objectives laid down in the United Nations Charter, it can also become an adverse force if it fosters the fragmentation of the world instead of its integration. We have devoted a good deal of reflection to this matter in ECLAC in our analyses of economic cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean, and we have pointed out in this respect that integration agreements can act as either building blocks or stumbling blocks in the quest for better international linkages, depending on the content and scope of the undertakings entered into. Therefore, just as we advocated open regionalism for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 1994) in an effort to reconcile regional with international cooperation, it is necessary to avoid any form of cut-and-dried division of such matters between the United Nations and the regional bodies. Once again, this represents a space where the United Nations and the regional bodies should give each other mutual support, as provided for in Chapter VIII of the Charter.

2. Shared responsibility

In its most basic expression, the United Nations Organization is an intergovernmental body which reflects the desire of sovereign States to establish a plurinational instrument for tackling common problems. Governments are usually reluctant to endow such bodies with faculties which detract from national sovereignty. There are instances, however, where certain national spheres of authority have been subordinated to the common interest, as in the case of the European Union, which has entrusted certain

functions to its Commission. In other situations, including that of the United Nations, the tendency is to empower the respective Secretariat to raise initiatives but not to take actual action without the express consent of the member governments. Thus, it might be said, the Secretariats propose but the governments dispose.

It is worth bearing in mind this classical conception of a plurinational body, because it lies at the root of many misunderstandings regarding the Organization's performance. The image of a Secretariat which takes it upon itself to adopt capricious or erroneous decisions or which usurps the functions of national authorities is just as mistaken as the idea that the faults and shortcomings of the Organization are attributable to "irresponsible" attitudes of member governments. This is another way of expressing the obvious truth that the role played by the Organization and the quality of its performance are the responsibility of both parties – governments and Secretariat – and depend on the way they interact with each other.

In other words, both the successes and the failures of the Organization reflect the shared responsibility of the Secretariat and the member governments. The Secretariat cannot be blamed for the unfortunate events in Bosnia, for example, nor on the other hand can it take refuge in the argument that the blame attaches exclusively to governments.

This approach does, however, raise the need to look into the forms of interaction of the Secretariat with its 185 member governments and into the whole question of the effectiveness of intergovernmental forums as places for the taking of decisions. And this question leads in turn to the third item in our reflections: the efficiency and efficacy with which the United Nations carries out its functions.

3. The means

The question of its own restructuring has formed part of the agenda of the United Nations for many years, and in recent years there have been a number of new proposals for adapting it to the demands of the coming century (Ogata and Volcker, 1993; Childers and Urquhart, 1994; Qureshi and von Weizsäcker, 1995). In point of fact, many of the criticisms levelled at the Organization concern the cumbersome nature of the decision-making process and the style of work of intergovernmental forums, the alleged inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the Secretariat and

the specialized agencies, and the lack of a sense of direction of the organization as a whole. In other words, it is not so much the *ends* of the Organization that are being criticised as the *means* used to reach them.

It must be admitted that these criticisms are not without a certain amount of justification. For example, it is hard to understand why the composition of the permanent members of the Security Council in 1995 continues to reflect the situation in 1945. It is also undeniable that, after 50 years of institutional life, cases of duplication and overlapping of functions have arisen as the Organization has set up bodies to take care of new issues, without doing away with existing bodies. However, these are aspects which can be put right through the joint action of member governments and the Secretariat itself and which do not affect the essence or principles of the Charter, whose validity remains unquestioned.

There are two main areas in the debate on the best ways to take fuller advantage of the United Nations' enormous potential for encompassing its objectives. The first is connected with the matter already mentioned earlier: how to enhance the synergy of the interaction between the Secretariat and member governments so that each of the parties can do its job in support of the proper functioning of the Organization. The second refers to the quality of the way the Secretariat, the various programmes and the spe-

cialized agencies carry out their activities and the content and scope of the latter.

The adaptation of these two areas to the changing international circumstances is what is usually meant when reference is made to the "reform" or, in even more euphemistic terms, the "revitalization and restructuring" of the United Nations. Many skeptics doubt whether it is really possible to make any progress in these changes in view of the presumed lack of "political will" on the part of most governments, the resistance to change attributed to the international bureaucracy, and, above all, the enormous magnitude and complexity of the task. However, the changes already put into effect in the last two years (United Nations, 1994c) and the number of proposals under consideration (both for increasing the efficiency and efficacy of the Secretariat and for streamlining the functioning of intergovernmental forums) suggest that these gloomy forecasts may be somewhat premature. There are signs that the necessary adaptation will indeed take place in a deliberate and well-conceived manner, thanks to the joint efforts of member governments and the Secretariat. Even if this were not so, it is in any case highly likely that the Organization will be impelled by the force of circumstances to adapt to a world that is qualitatively different from that which determined its activities during its first fifty years of life (Communiqué of the Group of Seven, Halifax, Canada, paragraph 36).

III

Against the background of all this discussion about what the United Nations has achieved in its first fifty years: what is to be said about the work of ECLAC? And even more importantly, are there any lessons that the Commission can contribute in order to consolidate the achievements and correct the shortcomings that the Organization as a whole has displayed? When we make such an appraisal, it would appear that this microcosm within the United Nations system, whose action is limited to the economic and social spheres, warrants a rating above the average, at least if its performance is subjected to the most stringent of all tests: that of its relevance and pertinence. Especially in its pioneering years, ECLAC had an undeniable impact on the concept and praxis of public policy in Latin America and the Caribbean, and this

influence is all the more noteworthy because it came from our analytical work: that is to say, from the abstract world of ideas.

It is worth looking at the specific components which have made possible the Commission's relative success in the course of its life as an institution. In this respect, there are five elements that should be highlighted: first, we identified a function through which we could be of benefit to our member governments; second, we managed to shape an "institutional message" and a personality of our own; third, we managed to maintain our validity over the years by adapting to the changes taking place in our institutional context; fourth, we were successful in establishing a lively and creative form of interaction with member governments; and lastly, there was constant

concern to keep up high standards of quality and performance.

1. ECLAC's function

When the Commission was set up in 1947, the relevant Economic and Social Council resolution assigned it one very general function and two more specific ones. The general function was: "raising the level of economic activity in Latin America and ... maintaining and strengthening the economic relations of the Latin American countries both among themselves and with other countries of the world". The more specific ones were to "Make or sponsor such investigations and studies ... as the Commission deems appropriate" and to "Undertake ... the collection, evaluation and dissemination of ... economic, technological and statistical information...".¹ Member governments and the Secretariat were faced with the task of giving real content to a mandate which was actually extremely broad.

The successful implementation of that mandate turned ECLAC into a recognized centre of Latin American economic thinking and a highly respected source of information. ECLAC supplemented this work with some activities designed to promote co-operation and others of an operational nature, especially in the fields of training and technical assistance. In this way, the Commission undoubtedly fulfilled the mandates assigned by the United Nations in the economic and social sectors (the Charter specifically refers to the function of promoting the economic and social progress of all nations), while at the same time it filled a vacuum at the regional level, since at the beginning of the 1950s there was no other public or private institution devoted to analysing economic development from the standpoint of the countries of the region.

In carrying out its tasks, the ECLAC Secretariat developed a style of work with some distinctive features, especially the fact that in its analytical activities it always gave priority to the links between theory and praxis. In other words, research was cen-

tered on questions of real or potential interest for policy-makers. This criterion of placing concepts at the service of action, or ideas at the service of reality, also explains the inductive nature of the Secretariat's work, which means that its economic policy recommendations are backed up by conceptual interpretations which are validated in turn by concrete situations.

Furthermore, a regular feature of ECLAC's manner of working was its questioning of the mechanical application of conventional thinking to Latin American conditions, which also meant questioning the assumption that the effects produced by economic policy measures were bound to be similar in each case, regardless of whether they were applied in developed or developing economies.

In its pioneering years, ECLAC carried out this function in a creative and original manner. In-depth country studies were made: something virtually unknown at that time. The international situation was analysed in terms of its incidence on the region's economies. A system was organized for the preparation of indicators and statistical information in all the countries, using common methodologies, so as to be able to evaluate economic and social performance throughout the region. Initiatives were set afoot for promoting intra-regional cooperation, especially in Central America. Perhaps the most ambitious undertaking, however, was the effort to put together a holistic proposal incorporating a coherent set of ideas on the economic progress of Latin America in the decades following the war, starting from an element common to all the countries: the way they interacted with the world economy.²

In short, the institution (the Secretariat and its member countries) constructed a working space or functional niche which provided it with its *raison d'être* in the eyes of its member governments and within the United Nations. Indeed, the Commission succeeded in embodying the objectives and global principles of the United Nations Charter in a tangible presence in the region, with proposals that could be translated into concrete actions. In this respect, with-

¹ Economic and Social Council resolution 106(VI), 25 February 1948. In subsequent resolutions, these functions of the Commission were expanded by the addition of others, such as cooperating in the formulation and development of coordinated guidelines to serve as the basis for practical action to promote the economic development of the region, helping to carry out functions connected with the United Nations technical assistance programme, and dealing with the social aspects of development.

² The best-known document in this respect, which Albert Hirschman baptised the "ECLAC Manifesto", was ECLAC, *Economic Survey of Latin America, 1949*, United Nations, New York, 1951 (United Nations publication, Sales No. 1951.II.G.1).

out in any way seeking to preach given doctrines, the Secretariat placed itself at the service of governments as a kind of sounding-board for ideas and recommendations likely to foster debate and as a means of backing up the exercise of collective reflection with research, advisory assistance, training, and the formulation of interpretations and proposals with respect to economic policy.

2. ECLAC's identity

The fulfillment of this function has also been accompanied by the development of a certain institutional "seal of identity", based on the set of ideas which has inspired the Secretariat's work from the beginning, but can in no way be seen as an ideology. This set of ideas stemmed from the dual commitment which the founders of the institution imparted to all its activities: on the one hand, a commitment to development (and hence also to change), and on the other, a commitment to ECLAC's deep-seated Latin American identity (and also Caribbean, from the 1970s onward). Thus, historically the Commission has tackled the development agenda from the standpoint of the countries within its geographical radius of action.

This is not the place to refer to the basic concepts and proposals of the Secretariat, which are in any case very well known. What is worth stressing, however, is the capacity displayed by ECLAC for putting together a form of economic thinking of its own, and especially for enhancing the economic theories currently in vogue in the world and adapting them to the actual conditions of the Latin American countries. This quality also explains ECLAC's outstanding capacity for generating interest and support, especially in its pioneering years. Indeed, ECLAC's economic thinking has become part of the intellectual heritage of Latin America: a store of knowledge which is appreciated as something precious, even by those who deeply disagree with the original theories of the Commission. This institutional identity is relatively rare in the United Nations system, and it represents an asset of the highest importance.

3. Adaptation to new circumstances

Another central feature of the Commission has been its capacity to adapt itself constantly to new circumstances, especially as regards the content of its "message", but also in terms of its organization.

With regard to the first of these aspects, in view of the fact that actual conditions are subject to constant changes, ECLAC recognized from the very beginning that it was essential to mould its thinking to the changing economic and social circumstances, including the changes due to development policies themselves. The Secretariat therefore never saw its conceptual matrix as an immutable body of ideas, and Raúl Prebisch himself repeatedly stressed the need for the unceasing renewal of ECLAC's thinking (Prebisch, 1978).

Thus, the Commission was well placed to interpret the circumstances and conditions of the region when it began to emerge from the sequels of the 1930s and the vagaries of the Second World War, proposing among other things the promotion of industrialization and selective public sector intervention in the economy: guidelines which appeared eminently reasonable as means of tackling the obstacles hindering development at that time. Later, in the 1960s, the institution laid increasing stress on the need to diversify and modernize the region's export capacity in view of the long-standing current account deficits of the vast majority of the countries (ECLAC, 1961).

Basically, as changes took place both in the outside environment and within the region itself, ECLAC strove to update its proposals. This ongoing task, seen as a never-ending process or duty, reached record levels in recent years because of the surprising changes undergone by the region and its international environment in the 1990s. The results of this effort were compiled in a set of publications from 1985 onwards (ECLAC, 1985 and 1987), and these questions were dealt with in particular depth as from 1990, with the document *Changing production patterns with social equity* (ECLAC, 1990). Subsequent studies took up more specific issues and that global frame of reference continued to be developed and analysed in greater detail (ECLAC, 1991, 1992, 1994 and 1995; ECLAC/CELADE, 1993; ECLAC/OREALC, 1992).

The fact that ECLAC takes such pains to adapt its proposals to the changing circumstances and concerns of the region is a logical consequence of its fulfillment of the mandates for which it was originally established. A conscious effort is made to ensure that the analytical work is pertinent and useful, so that it has to be centered on the issues which occupy the attention of the policy-makers of member govern-

ments. This does not mean, of course, that the degree of relevance of the Commission's proposals has remained unchanged throughout the life of the institution: the early work of the Secretariat not only reflected its most creative period but also the period when it had most influence on economic policy application.

In this respect, both the content of the message and member governments' receptiveness to it have tended to vary over time. Even as far back as the 1960s, some authors perceived a "loss of intellectual leadership" (Fishlow, 1985). Rather than representing a sign of decadence, however, this observation indicated that governments had a growing capacity of their own in terms of the formulation and application of economic policies and strategies, while at the same time there was an ever-wider range of opinions offered by international, and in some cases local, centres of economic thinking.

If ECLAC's work is seen as the provision of a sounding-board for ideas and recommendations that can give rise to fruitful debate, then the fact that the institution was losing its "monopoly" over regional economic thinking should actually be interpreted as a highly positive development, since this meant that its activities were finding an ever-stronger echo at the country level. For the Commission, the increase in the number of its interlocutors and the change in its style of interaction with them (an aspect which will be dealt with later in this article), together with its capacity to identify and analyse the key issues of the moment, have been the main factors which have allowed it to maintain its validity without interruption.

In its institutional structure, too, ECLAC has shown its ability to adapt itself to new circumstances. In particular, it has been capable of incorporating new items into its work programme without, in most cases, setting up new units to deal with them. This has been possible because the prime focus of the institution is the development of the Latin American and Caribbean countries, and the issues which have been emerging in the course of time – the energy crisis, human settlements, the external debt crisis, short-term economic policy, the environmental dimension, equality of the sexes, the role of transnational corporations – have been incorporated into the central work of the Commission using a multidisciplinary approach, rather than tackling them in isolation. In this way, it has been possible to avoid conflicts due to the superimposition of new questions

on top of long-standing issues and the creation of new units on top of existing ones.

Likewise, ECLAC has managed to preserve its very special role within the overall range of Latin American and Caribbean pluri-national institutions. The constant concern to avoid duplication of activities between the United Nations (in the economic and social spheres) and the Bretton Woods institutions is not a problem at the regional level. On the one hand, the latter institutions do not have bodies operating at the strictly regional level, and on the other, ECLAC's activities have remained sufficiently different from those of the IDB, the OAS and SELA to avoid any risk of duplication. Indeed, the opposite is the case, since deliberate efforts have been made to secure greater complementation between the activities of ECLAC and those of the regional bodies in question, sometimes through formal cooperation agreements.³

4. The links between governments and the Secretariat

It is easy sometimes to lose sight of the fact that ECLAC represents the sum of its member governments "institutionalized in intergovernmental forums" and the Secretariat. The way these two groups interact goes a long way towards determining the degree of relevance of the institution as a whole.

Here, the links between the two groups go beyond those normally envisaged when thinking of the traditional image of intergovernmental bodies ("the Secretariats propose and the governments dispose"): instead, a dynamic and creative working relationship has been forged between the two. Within this framework, the comparative advantages of the Secretariat are the following: first, its capacity for reflection on medium- and long-term options and strategies, and second, the multi-faceted image it has earned by the fact of carrying on activities in all the countries. For their part, the governments have the advantage of possessing an intimate knowledge of their own national situations, especially as regards the constraints perceived in difficult short-term circumstances.

³ Thus, a Special Cooperation Committee has been operating between the OAS, the IDB and ECLAC for many years. Recently, this Committee has been given specific mandates as a result of the Americas Summit held in Miami in December 1994. See, for example, the Joint Declaration issued by the Ministerial Meeting on Trade on 30 June 1995.

Bringing these two viewpoints together greatly enhances the institution's capacity for creative work and action at the regional level.

The interaction between governments and the Secretariat is an ongoing practice and takes many forms, including country visits by ECLAC staff members, visits by government authorities to the Commission, meetings, seminars, and all kinds of other contacts. There is also a broad range of national-level actors who form part of the system of consultation between the Secretariat and governments. Outstanding among them are the economic ministries (which are the main interlocutors of ECLAC) and the ministries of foreign affairs, which are responsible for formal contacts with the United Nations. In this respect, the ECLAC Secretariat has managed to build bridges among the various areas of jurisdiction which exist within governments –and which are reflected in the United Nations Secretariat too– and this has greatly enriched its own work. Finally, this interaction is not limited to governments, since it also extends to the academic community and private agents of the region.

5. Standards of performance

The concept of "centre of excellence" is a subjective idea which admits of various different interpretations. If we use the conventional parameters applic-

able to an intergovernmental body, however, it would certainly be no exaggeration to apply this term to the ECLAC Secretariat. This is attested by the quality and professionalism of its principal documents, the calibre and prestige of the staff members who have served in the Secretariat during its 46 years of existence, its capacity to mobilize interest and support, and the trustworthiness of the information it provides.

Likewise, the application of conventional criteria of productivity suggest that the efficiency and efficacy of ECLAC are well above the average for the United Nations. Rigorous standards are maintained as regards the programming of activities, quality control, performance evaluation, the impact of ECLAC's action with respect to its main clients (member governments) and intra-institutional development.

This does not mean, of course, that there is no room for improvement in ECLAC's performance. However, bearing in mind that many governments –especially of developed countries– currently display a tendency to question the achievements and doubt the usefulness of the international agencies, it is worthy of note that –at least in the case of the Latin American and Caribbean countries– the public and private actors with which the Commission has to do apparently continue to regard it with a high level of approval.

IV

This article does not seek to present ECLAC as a model that should be imitated by the rest of the United Nations. That would not only be presumptuous but would also ignore the fact that many of the factors conditioning the institutional life of the Commission –especially its historical background– are not applicable in other contexts. Nevertheless, some of the strengths of the institution are indeed the result of factors that could offer some pointers for the reform of the United Nations as a whole. Among these elements, as I already noted, is the fact that ECLAC occupies a well-defined functional ambit, has succeeded in building up an institutional personality or identity of its own, has developed a great capacity to adapt to changing conditions, has fostered a dynamic and creative form of interaction between the Secretariat and its member governments, and has maintained rigorously high standards of management and

performance. This list is a good definition of the kinds of reforms that are needed for the United Nations system and, within it, ECLAC itself.

To sum up, then, when drawing up a balance-sheet of the work of the Organization on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary, we should not limit ourselves only to paying tribute. It is also important to identify its flaws and shortcomings, with a view to making the changes needed to allow it to face the challenges of the next fifty years. It would appear that the will exists –both among governments and within the Secretariat– to make these changes a reality. There is therefore every reason to face the future with serene optimism and faith that, as the next century draws near, the Organization will keep on fulfilling the purposes for which it was created.

(Original: Spanish)

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