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Another Decade of Frustration?

There are plans for making the ten years between 1970 and 1980 the "Second Development Decade". When the United Nations' Economic and Social Council met in Geneva during July last, the UN Secretary General, U Thant, outlined the political philosophy of the new development programme: "Drawing nearer to each other, cooperation, and joint planning." Unless the nations of the world succeed in carrying out this design, he warned, the world would founder in a mire of chaos. The two Conferences on World Trade (UNCTAD I and II) failed to throw open the gates to an era of the poor and the rich drawing together and of cooperation between them, and in their proceedings, there was not a trace of joint planning. U Thant therefore saw in them nothing but a "ritual obeisance" of the powerful nations before an ideal, which cost them little and was performed in the safe knowledge that not even the biggest and most spectacular conference or organisation could enforce a new policy against the will of the industrialised nations.

True, there has been a surfeit of spectacular conferences and prolix dramatisations of the problems. The main characteristic of such international performances is not their practical effect but their noisy drama. The "ritual obeisance" made by the industrialised nations, and complained of by U Thant, harmonises beautifully with all the traditions developed by the United Nations Organisation and with the customs displayed by its younger member states. The most recent jamboree held on development aid, UNCTAD II, was brimful of ritualistic gestures. One of these customs was that of delegations "leaving the hall". Whenever a South African delegate had something to say, the entire bloc of "Black Africa's" representatives marched out in one body; when an Israeli rose to speak, all the Arabs rose to shuffle out together; and when South Korea wanted to make a contribution, all the Communists left the hall — faithfully obeying the UN ritual that everybody will listen only to what he wants to hear. He who might make an undesirable observation will be abused but not listened to.

Behaving in this fashion will utterly vitiate the very purpose of the organisation and render it absurd: drawing nearer together, cooperation, and joint planning are reduced to hollow rhetoric, unless the industrialised countries and the less developed nations are prepared to re-think all their established notions on development aid. Among such re-thinking ought to be a turning-away of all development aid from considerations of selfishness, and instead an assessment of its practical effects. At the same time, developing countries must develop sober moderation and more realism in their expectations.

Before the great bridge can be thrown across the chasm between the poor and the rich nations, it will be necessary to plumb the actual depth of the gap into which the pillars are to be sunk that are to carry the bridge. It will help nobody if we always search for a magic formula that could help developing countries to attain, in a few years, such affluence as the Atlantic nations have been able to produce only through the hard work of many decades. The agencies of the UN and especially UNCTAD will have their hands full till 1971, when the new Development Decade is to begin, to hammer out at least unified guidelines and principles on how to make national and international aid programmes agree with each other. High flights of fancy about what to expect and home-tailored conceptions on what the world should do will only hamper progress along the path of genuinely useful aid. Developing nations ought to be made to understand that history does not know leaps or sudden rushes forward. Yet progress, though gradual and measured, also requires changes in the underlying social and political structures of any developing society. On the other hand, the industrialised nations must desist from their attempts to export their way of life and institutions to developing countries. Nobody currently has a clear idea of development strategy that should determine our actions between 1970 and 1980 — in spite of UNCTAD I and II. But during the coming Development Decade, what is at stake is not "only" the disillusion with unrealistic and hopeful dreams but the final proof for the possibility of internationally concerted action for building up the economies of less developed countries.

Wolfgang Reisener