

Pathologies of Expanding Moral Authority in the United Nations Development System

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Introduction

The United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP), initiated in 1999, now comprises eleven major works that attempt to reverse the perceived problem that the UN's contributions to thinking on major world issues have not been adequately chronicled. Whilst not strictly devoted to the goal of redressing the UN's alleged marginalisation relative to other international organisations, many UNIHP works exhibit overt rivalry with the Bretton Woods institutions. Following international organisation theory developed by Barnett and Finnemore, bureaucracies such as the UN that see their sources of authority and autonomy threatened by other international organisations—or member states—often react by virulently reasserting their claims to various founts of international authority. The UN has done so by focussing on its inclusive nature and accountability, expert knowledge, protection of vulnerable groups, its progressive thinking, and its prominent role in labelling calendrical time in accordance with its development goals. As argued here, the UN has highlighted and reconstituted these various foci for the purpose of bulwarking and expanding the scope of the UN's *moral authority* in the field of international development, and particularly in respect to the World Bank and IMF. The UN has thusly fashioned itself as the unsung hero of development policy, from which vanguard and usually correct views and activities have gone largely unappreciated. I caricature the UN in this way without the intention of discrediting its claims for redress, but in order to draw attention to various organisational pathologies that may emerge through a reactionary generation of moral authority. I conclude by evaluating the extent to which organisational pathologies of the UN undermine its ability to carry out its mandate for international development.

The United Nations Authority Generating Machine

In international organisation theory, as outlined by Barnett and Finnemore (2004: 26), authority is composed of state-delegated power, the organisation's rational-legal impartiality, its claims on expertise, and its moral pre-eminence. Whilst only a glimmering of rational-legal impartiality is strictly necessary to pass muster with suspicious members states (Barnett &

Finnemore, 2004: 20), the success of an international organisation (IO) like the United Nations depends on how much it can leverage all of the above-mentioned sources of authority to protect its ideological and practical domain from incursion by states or other IOs. In the arena of development, the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) authority is constantly being challenged by the Bretton Woods institutions, which are able to use their superior financial resources, strict technocratic expertise (e.g. econometrics), and buy-in from industrialised countries to dominate over the development discourse (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004: 30). The UNDP has largely responded to this challenge by incorporating explicit moral content, particularly human rights, into its development activities (Hoffman, 1970: xxxv). St. Clair (2004: 188) proposes that the UNDP has become "normative" as a default strategy to justify its existence given its lack of practical power. By acting as "moral leaders of society and framing ideational terms of reference", the UNDP has been able to shore up its authoritative deficit relative to the Bretton Woods institutions (Taylor, 2004: 125).

How does the UN go about leveraging moral authority to offset its relative deficits in expert authority and resources? Its first task, as Barnett and Finnemore describe (2004: 25), is to force a transition from being "an authority" on various moral principles that it is mandated to protect (such as human rights, environment) into being "in authority"—in other words, to cease being one actor in the human rights discourse and to become the clearinghouse on that issue. The specialised agencies of the UN are good examples of this effect: the World Health Organization is the pre-eminent actor in global health, whilst the International Labour Organisation is the voice of international labourers. This manner of leveraging moral authority to increase overall authority is designed to pick the proverbial low-hanging fruit by fortifying existing monopolies in various issue-areas.

The second manner of leveraging moral authority, on the other hand, is more pervasive, and is the driving force behind the near-indefinite expansionary capability of an IO's moral authority. This task involves using knowledge to constitute new areas of social reality, over which an IO then assumes moral authority (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004: 7). The creation of the World Food Programme, UN Environmental Programme (UNEP), and the UN Population Fund are all products of the leveraging of moral authority. The UN High Commission on Refugees is particularly illustrative in this respect. It was created with a three-year lifespan with the limited mandate of managing European refugees. By redefining refugees and exploiting coinciding international refugee flights, it was able to gain permanent license and exclusive privilege over

multilateral management of refugees.¹ There is, however, a dark side to such expansionary and monopolistic moral authority. The mechanics by which the UN system transitions into its position “in authority” and constitutes new domain in which to involve itself present opportunities for institutional pathologies—bureaucratic processes rendering results counter-productive to the institution’s core mission—to set in and erode the effectiveness of the organisation as a whole. Before describing these pathologies specifically, I will discuss these mechanics, using the topic of human development as an example.

The Mechanics of Generating Moral Authority

The foremost manner in which the UN defines its transnational moral authority is by referencing its establishment upon four pillars of universal social concern: peace, development, decolonization, and human rights (Emmerij et al., 2001: 24). I will focus primarily on human rights as the issue overlaps with the other three guiding principles, and is thus the most useful for analysis. As the progenitor of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the UN considers itself to have something of a primordial monopoly on the issue of human rights. As a result of the almost universal applicability of human rights to the delegated mandate of the UN, the UN has used ‘issues of human rights’ to justify its expansion into many realms of international affairs. Consider the following words from a UNIHP volume carefully:

“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one of the most inspiring international documents of the twentieth century. [...] Since the adoption of the declaration more than fifty years ago, the UN has undertaken a great deal of work to further elaborate the content of human rights, to develop a variety of instruments to influence legislation and practice human rights at the national level, and to create institutions and procedures within the system to encourage the implementation of such instruments.” (Jolly et al., 2004: 172)

The wording allows for the moral issue of human rights to infuse technocratic conceptions of “institutions” and “instruments” and “implementation” and thereby demonstrates how the UN constitutes a social and bureaucratic reality over which it can assert authority. The authority to define and operationalize what is a very amorphous and contested issue is a powerful tool that

¹ This example is discussed thoroughly by Barnett and Finnemore in Chapter 4 of *Rules for the World* (2004).

can be used to spawn supplementary “offices” of moral authority, such as children’s rights and women’s rights. Whilst the protection and embodiment of widely shared principles gives the UN an external source of moral authority (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004: 23), the UN also generates moral authority through internal activities.

In particular, moral authority is produced internally through the UN’s policy of egalitarian inclusion and its role as the mouthpiece of silenced or vulnerable groups. The UN General Assembly’s equal voting system is but the most obvious aspect of this claim, but it is an important one because it stands in contrast to the weighted voting systems of the World Bank and IMF, which, by nature, favour rich-country interests (Jolly et al., 2004: 302). Whilst the voting structure is important for enabling subaltern ideas to survive bureaucratic oversight, the UN promotes inclusion far more through various active means.

Specifically, the UN organises international conferences to attract political, media, and popular attention to issues that it wishes to legitimate and expand into. Writers of the UN Intellectual History Project state frankly that, “The world conferences were invented by the UN system in the 1970s” and elaborate that, far from being the wasteful jamborees they are made out to be by critics, the conferences are instrumental in pushing the envelope on progressive social issues (Jolly et al., 2004: 180). By this account, the melange of agencies, conventions, declarations, and ideas that were produced at, or that gained legitimacy from, UN world conferences are the manifestations of a highly inclusive and participatory process (Jolly et al., 2004: 162). Inclusion is also apparent in the naming scheme of the products of these conferences—such as the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights or the Cairo Programme of Action. These titles typically include the name of the city involved, which serves to create historical record of worldwide participation and give documents a metropolitan aura. The world conferences are also a primary forum for the expression of the plight of vulnerable groups, such as women, children, disabled people, and even ‘least-developed countries’. These conferences were the “birthplaces” (to use a UNIHP term) of institutions like the UN Environmental Programme (Stockholm) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (Rome), and enabled the creation of such documents as Agenda 21 (Rio de Janeiro) and the Millennium Declaration (New York). This manner of inclusion allows the UN to *derive moral authority from its vanguard promotion of marginalised social issues and groups*, and allows the UN to fortify that authority by creating documents and institutions that reaffirm the presence (and perhaps monopoly) of the UN in that field.

As an IO with wide membership, the UN is also in a position to control and label calendrical time in such a way as to consecrate a discrete space of time for a UN-defined sacral

purpose, and, in this manner, to employ time as a means for social progress. Although it was first the idea of then-president John F. Kennedy, the UN announced the 1960s as the Development Decade (Emmerij et al., 2001: 85-86). This sanctified the decade as one in which the UN was “doing good things” and, more importantly, it ensured that any activities occurring in the name of development during that decade were, on some level, attributable to the UN (Kollontai, as quoted in Legum, 1970: 44). Even the Bretton Woods institutions bought in, although more sparingly. Since the 1960s, the activity of labelling time has become a hallmark of the UN development system, and many issues for which world conferences or conventions have been held, such as women’s rights, education, and sustainable development, have received a symbolic “decade” from the United Nations. Although the subject matter is of a different nature, this activity is akin to announcing a holiday—an action that previously had been reserved for religions and rare national events. Probably the most successful recent example of this is the Millennium Development Goals, which allow the UN to bring the gravity of 1,000 years to bear upon the priorities it has, through its inclusive process, come to consensus on. Because of this benevolent and spiritual nature of labelling time, and because it imparts some degree of power over international priorities, it has been an effective way of generating moral authority.

The UN system has been particularly successful in what psychologists refer to as “basking in reflected glory”—usually of famous charismatic individuals who have been associated with the UN, especially Nobel laureates. For the early years, the names Arthur Lewis, Gunnar Myrdal, Julius Nyerere, Barbara Ward, and Walt Rostow come to mind. Whilst these names may not be familiar to everyone, a Nobel Prize usually is. On the other hand, with the exception of their primary figureheads, the IMF and World Bank have not drawn in the type of epic talent that the United Nations apparently has. Jolly et al. (2004: 303-304) comment that the UN attracts talent not with a salary, but with “its moral vision”. In this way, the UN inheres something of a romantic vanguard impoverishment. This bears out in Magaret Joan Anstee’s description of the office of the UN Technical Assistance Committee in Manila:

“The office was housed in a disused surgery in the grounds of the Philippine General Hospital, a dilapidated building with a leaking roof. In the rainy season every room was festooned with tin cans and any other receptacles that could be found to catch the drips...yet there was a tremendous feeling of enthusiasm and pioneering at that time.” (1985: 20)

This description carries with it a mystique similar to that of social movements, for which one must toil away, sustained only by ideology. The United Nations could thus be seen as a battleground between hegemonic ideologies and grassroots counterforces (Cox & Sinclair, 1996: 494-523 as quoted in Weiss & Carayaniss 2001). Well-known individuals at the UN who mediate this “battle” are attracted by the moral affirmation of work at the UN and, in turn, “lend” their moral credibility (expertise, charisma, fame, etc.) to the authority of the UN.

The final mechanism for generating moral authority I wish to cover is intimately tied in with the topic of famous thinkers associated with the UN, because they are the source of the creative and progressive elements of UN activity. Hall and Biersteker (2002: 14) point out that moral authority is often “associated with [the organisation’s] emancipatory and normatively progressive social agendas”. I have already discussed human rights, and mentioned gender rights and environment in this context. However, the UNIHP delivers a veritable laundry list of issues for which the editors believe the UN was progressive (or rather, was “ahead of the curve”), and a few for which the UN made “omissions” (or rather, was “behind the curve”). Various, there are claims that the UN was the first to make use of multidisciplinary methods; the UN invented the idea of “Honesty International” (Transparency International was established independently a few years later) (Haq, 1995: 223); and UN claims authorship of the “country-led approach” to development, which has been adopted large scale in the early 21st Century (Jolly et al., 2004: 69, 71). One UNIHP work even claims that the UN predicted the onslaught of global warming in 1969 (Jolly et al., 2004: 286). Not exhaustive in any respect, this list illustrates the range of “normatively progressive” issues from which the UN derives moral authority. To some extent, however, even “omissions” can be turned into opportunities for the gathering of moral authority. As Barnett and Finnemore (2004: 160) point out, “Learning from past failures, staff are likely to draw the conclusion that to carry out their mandate they need to expand their sphere of action, and they use failure to push states to allow this”. In this manner, acknowledged failures of the UN, most notably HIV/AIDS, international migration, and debt burden have become issues around which the UN has more recently mobilised and jockeyed for morally authoritative roles internationally. To contrast rhetorical claims with actual accomplishments, I will now turn to the failure of the UNDP to provide alternatives to the so-called Washington Consensus and the UNDP’s ensuing drive to promote human development.

Authorship of Human Development

Internal explanations of the emergence of human development at the UN are often focussed on teleologically tracing a line (or “trajectory”) between the inception of the idea at the UN and its impacts on current ideas and practices. The UNIHP write that the conceptual foundations of human development appeared primarily within the UN, and in particular in the works of Hans Singer in the early 1960s. However, Haq, the first editor of the first *Human Development Report* (HDR), wrote that the idea of human development truly emerged in the Spring of 1989 when he presented the idea of an HDR to William Draper III—then director of the UNDP—and they agreed to publish in the subsequent year (see Haq, 1995: 25). To some extent, both of these views are correct: Haq’s because until the HDR authoritatively codified human development, it was a contested idea, often simply seen as the promotion of “human capital” (or education); the UNIHP’s because the influence of Singer’s work can be seen in the contemporary writings of Amartya Sen, Paul Streeten, and Mahbub ul Haq, whom have ‘made human development what it is today’. However, both of these views support the UN’s monopoly over the idea. For the UNIHP, human development is a primordial issue, one that is as old as human rights and has informed the activities of the UN’s specialised agencies since the first decades (Jolly et al., 2004: 289-291). The formal appearance of human development in the early 1990s was merely an affirmation of what the UN had been doing all along. For Haq (1995: 222), some vague notions relating to human development existed throughout the UN’s life, but the HDRs allowed the idea to achieve the conceptual and analytical rigour necessary to compete with the Bretton Woods institutions’ economic hegemony.

The prominence of human development in contemporary development discourse has been, for the UNDP, a decisive victory against the authority of the Bretton Woods institutions. The *Human Development Report*, in publication since 1990, provides a near one-to-one alternative to the World Development Report (WDR), whilst its flagship *Human Development Index* (HDI) undermines the monopoly of GDP as the pre-eminent development indicator (Addison, 1993). The 1991 WDR is in many ways “taking cover” from the ideological fallout of the inaugural HDR in 1990. In it, the World Bank is forced to defend its view that education, gender rights, and other social goals are primarily (though not exclusively) means for economic growth. The report also strongly attacks the HDR’s example of Sri Lanka’s promotion of human development with low economic growth, contrasting it to its own example of Malaysia. Finally, the report discursively challenges the HD indicator by commenting that, of the constituent parts of the HDI, “none ... are devoid of drawbacks” (WDR, 1991: 55-56, 38-39, 47). The one element that the WDR could not defend against is that, by virtue of their human-centric message and the overarching moral authority of the UN, the HDRs assert a degree of

moral authority unmatched by WDRs (Various Years). Up until 1997, when the World Bank eventually capitulated to the basic tenets of human development in its WDR, the Bank had continued to consider fundamental elements of human development, such as education, healthcare, and nutrition, as merely instrumental in the process of economic growth, whilst the HDRs had been emphasizing an inherent value to these elements.

However, as I alluded to before, the story of human development is actually one of failure—specifically failure to provide a timely alternative to the Washington Consensus in the 1980s (Jolly et al., 2004: 293). The UNDP had not succeeded in promoting human development using a loose definition in the face of the rational, technical strategies of the Washington Consensus. Whilst ‘basic needs’, ‘growth with redistribution’, and other predecessors of human development had some nominal effect, it was not until the head-on challenge of the *Human Development Report* that the UNDP was able to shore up its authoritative deficit. However, Haq and the UNIHP would be loathe to admit that it took the immense social misery of the 1980s, with the period’s strict neoliberal reforms, to provide favourable enough political ground for the emergence of human development. The early 1990s therefore experienced a convergence of interests and key individuals to make human development take shape (Weiss & Carayannis, 2001: 29,33). The irony is that *the moral authority the UNDP derives through the Human Development Report Office is as a product of its long-term failure to influence the development apparatus to abide by a concept of development considered fundamental to the UN’s mission.* The reasons for this failure are dismissed by UNIHP writers as external: in the hostile political environment of the 1980s, the UNDP’s vision was sidelined. In fact, the UNDP publish several documents endorsing structural adjustment (Cornia et al., 1987). The example of human development illustrates the significant vulnerabilities of the *internal* mechanisms of moral authority generation at the UNDP, which, as I shall show, provide ample opportunity for institutional pathologies to emerge that threaten the overall functioning of the organisation.

Pathologies of Moral Authority

As I have outlined above, the UN has employed a two-pronged strategy of fortification and expansion of its moral authority in order to counteract its deficits in resources and expert authority. It has tried to distinguish itself from the Bretton Woods institutions by highlighting and acting upon universal moral concerns, and in so doing has greatly expanded in scope over the decades. However, as Barnett and Finnemore write,

“IOs are also created as pragmatic political compromises, usually with deep limitations imposed by suspicious states on their organisational capacities and mandates. Thus, IOs are authorized and empowered by moral or aspirational claims that are much broader than their specific mandates or capacities.” (2004: 160)

In capacity terms, the UN is destined to underperform its disproportionately large moral mandate on a regular basis. But resource constraints are only part of the problem. I argue that it is the requirements of building up a counteractive moral authority that have forestalled the possibility for the UN to reform.

The mechanisms by which the UN promotes its moral authority—expansion and fortification—necessarily dilute its capacity to deliver on its moral promises. Yet the UN also has an imperative to continue expanding its moral domain in order to keep pace with international expectations. What is referred to as “mission creep” ensues, a process in which the UN is largely able to grow its authority (by virtue of its growing scope of moral purview) without commensurate growth in operational scale (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004: 9; Cox & Jacobson, 1973). As opportunities for expansion arise, such as for sustainable development, global warming, and participatory development, the UN has an imperative to be one of the main players or at least intimate to be such. World conference, Nobel laureates, and progressive ideas allow the UN to put itself in the captain’s chair (i.e. “in authority” rather than “an authority”) of an increasing number of social issues and thus creates the (false) expectation that the UN can manage its exclusive posts (Jackson, 1969: iii). Its failure to do so can often play into its bid for additional moral authority, as in the case of human development emerging from the problems of macroeconomic stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s.

In this way, failure or dysfunction is ‘referent-dependent’—failure from a human rights perspective (i.e. people suffered in the 1980s), and success from a IO power perspective (i.e. human development is now a salient issue managed by the UN) (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004: 36). Failure then, is often rational, insofar as it is instrumental in propelling mission creep (Bairoch, 1970: 34). UNIHP writers exemplify this trait in their description of the UN in the 1990s:

“The UN made an effort to regain some of its lost authority as a leading force in development, primarily by convening a series of international conferences on some of the most critical social and economic problems facing the peoples of the world.” (Jolly et al., 2004: 169)

What is absent from the UNIHP remedy for the “lost authority” of the 1980s is not a re-evaluation of the UN’s capability to carry out its mandate, which might seem to be the logical course of action, but a perceived need to move into *new* issue-areas in order to shore up authority.

This deficit of operational capacity became particularly apparent in the UNDP’s handling of the Asian Financial Crisis. Until the crisis, newly industrialised East Asian countries had been touted by the HDR as exemplars of investors in human capabilities. However, when the IMF responded to the crisis by drawing up macroeconomic stabilisation packages and imposed conditionality, UN agencies stood helpless to intervene, or even contribute to the policy-formation process (Toye, 2007, personal communication). As I have shown, the impetus for human development rose very much out of the disenchantment and misery caused by such stabilisation policies in the 1980s. It is therefore ironic that at the height of the pre-eminence of the ideational framework of human development in the mid 1990s, that the UN development system had no machinery in place to dispute such intervention. In its place, the UN asserted its role as a “post-project agency” by cleaning up after the mess (St Clair, 2004). Indeed, in Thailand, the UN’s responded, “Firstly, [with] a number of studies and cross-sectional discussion sessions [...] to gather information and brainstorm an appropriate action agenda”. The result of these sessions was the need for “reorientation and augmentation of external assistance” (Siamwalla & Sobchokchai, 1998: 66, 69), which led to the expansion of UN activity-types, and the buy-in, at long last, from many East Asian countries for publication of *National Human Development Reports*. A box in the 1998 HDR (UNDP: p. 98 Box 1.4) entitled, ‘The East Asian crisis—can it be turned into an opportunity?’, outlines ways in which the UNDP should expand its activities. The UN’s handling of the crisis is a well-illustrated example of an institutional pathology, in that its lack of practical capacity to complement its moral authority rendered UN agencies ill-equipped to respond proactively to the human development risk of the IMF’s intervention, but left the UNDP in a good position to expand its scope of authority on the heels of the financial crisis.

However, it is unfair to characterise the UN as simply gathering up moral authority with no plan or resources at all for acting upon it. It is perhaps its own monopolistic tendencies, which are a virtue of being “in authority”, that contribute to later dysfunction. *The UN does not simply put ideas out there – it constitutes them as salient moral issues with the explicit intention of taking the helm in regulating them.* Haq (1995: 28) suggests that the 1990s should see the UNDP persuading Third World countries to develop human development goals, encouraging

them to collect better data, and helping them to act upon this data. This creates something of a self-referential closed system: the UNDP invents the idea, how to measure it, and what to aim for—all of which require UNDP collaboration. Long (2004) points out that crystallizing a single knowledge system (or idea) such as this often comes at the expense of innovativeness and adaptability.

This ‘ideological-monopoly’ pathology is evident in the UN’s promotion of women in development. In many ways, this campaign has been characterized by the mechanisms for generating moral authority that I have described above: a series of world conferences and forums laid the groundwork for an International Women’s Year (1975), which kicked off a Decade for Women (1976-1986), which initiated a new multilateral framework known as ‘women in development’ (WID). These activities were followed up by the founding of the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in 1998, the dedication of a *Human Development Report* (1995) to gender, and the creation of a Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) and a Gender-related Development Index (GDI). However, during the evolution of the UN’s discourse on women and gender, the simple integrative framework of WID was challenged and expanded into ‘women and development’ (WAD) in the 1970s and then challenged again by proponents of ‘gender and development’ (GAD) in the 1980s (Razavi & Miller, 1995a). Whilst the transition from WID to WAD to GAD has spawned healthy debate in feminist circles, the lasting impression on large multilateral institutions and some states, as crystallized at the most recent World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995), has been referred to as “gender mainstreaming”.² This involves “systematic procedures and mechanisms within organizations [...] for explicitly taking account of gender issues at all stages of policy-making and programme design and implementation” (Baden & Goetz, 1997: 5). One of the most salient critiques of mainstreaming, as noted by the UN Research Institute on Social Development (UNRISD, which is an autonomous multi-disciplinary research agency), is that it overly focuses on mechanistic process and means rather than ends, and leads to a “preoccupation with the minutiae of procedures at all levels” (Baden & Goetz, 1997: 5; Razavi & Miller, 1995b). Mainstreaming is often euphemistically described as having ‘reduced women’s issues to the ticking of boxes’. It can therefore be said that the ‘ideological-monopoly’ pathology has operated at the UN by encouraging a path-dependent³ approach, which has, even in the face of vigorous debate, led to

² Admittedly, distilling the WID/WAD/GAD debate into one sentence unfairly represents the nuanced debates surround these issues over the past few decades. However, with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that “mainstreaming” is one of the strongest and most pre-eminent residuals of this period.

³ Path-dependency is referred to here as the development of activities and institutions that reinforce a particular view, thereby precluding other possibilities that may otherwise have become salient.

the overly technical, means-obsessed, operationalization of women's issues at the multilateral and national levels (Koczberski, 1998).

Conclusion

Why did the UN choose to focus on an “intellectual history project” rather than a traditional quasi-biographical account? The answer is that ideas are primarily what the UN has to sell—and these ideas are largely moral in nature. As I have described, its history has been one of expansion into broader fields of social interest, the primary result of which is the constitution and regulation of new ideas of human rights, sustainable development, gender, multidisciplinary, etc. To caricature the UN one final time, ideas (and, by proxy, moral authority) for the UN are analogously like rare paintings of great social value to society that a collector snaps up, lords over covetously, and monopolizes on their public presentation. The more paintings, the more authority. If challenged about poor public presentation, the collector justifies his or her holdings by asserting that he is protecting and restoring them. The UN, likewise, retains its hegemony in the face of member states and rival IOs by maintaining authority over a wide range of issue-areas and justifying its position with moral arguments. To the extent that this predisposes the UN for various institutional pathologies, such as structural underperformance, monopolization, over-standardization, it undermines the ability of the UN to fulfil its mandate for development.

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