

Dag vs DAC

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In his last years before he met his untimely death in Africa half a century ago, UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld challenged the colonial powers' continued attempts to quell the quest for freedom sweeping the continent. He expressed his frustration over "many member Nations [who] have not yet accepted the very limits put on their national ambitions by the very existence of the United Nations and by the membership of that Organisation". Hammarskjöld's warning about Africa being turned into a "happy hunting ground" has sadly been proven right.

In the mid-1950s, Hammarskjöld saw the formation of a larger and more dangerous "policy design" with the creation of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC). After 1945, Hammarskjöld had served at the Organization for European Economic Development (OEED) and witnessed its transformation into the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). As head of the UN, he soon became the small countries' spokesperson, and protested when the OECD sought to shape the development agenda in the former colonies through DAC.

That recent colonial powers – who only reluctantly gave in to the post-war "winds of change" – should now claim to be the saviours of the Third World, was bad news to Hammarskjöld. The responsibility for the developing world belonged, as he saw it, with the UN itself. Only the UN had the credibility to assist the newly emerging countries in their development and nation building. To Hammarskjöld, the OECD's DAC was a threat to the UN itself.

After fifty years, the record of the OECD-DAC has proven Hammarskjöld right. While the rest of the world has seen leaps in material accumulation, as well as in levels of life expectancy and welfare, Africa and other parts of the world subject to DAC leadership -- and through its close proximity to the IMF and the World Bank – has seen coordinated structural adjustment policies and aid programmes that have done everything but address the root causes of poverty and underdevelopment.

Rather, OECD-DAC has orchestrated a development agenda that has resulted in the largest ever gap between rich and poor countries that history has ever witnessed. But as DAC and the rich nations refused to transfer power to the UN in any significant way, Hammarskjöld would not be surprised to hear that wealth today is in the hands of the rich world to a degree unimaginable even in 1961.

Everyone claimed that the exploitation of colonies had to come to an end with decolonization. But Hammarskjöld also demanded substantive support for the developing nations that had been vandalized

by years of imperial abuse and exploitation. He would have loved to see considerable funds being transferred to the developing world annually. He demanded developing countries' fair and balanced integration into the world economy at large. As a fellowship of all nations, the UN was to hold the reins for all this.

Fifty years after Dag Hammarskjöld's untimely demise, the West has failed to let the UN become the tool for development he dreamed of. We ignored his warnings. Hammarskjöld also feared that splitting the UN into many specialized agencies would weaken the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (Ecosoc). We weakened the UN, not only by splitting it up and under-financing it, but also by channelling attention and authority away from the world organization over to the ostensibly more "effective" Bretton Woods institutions. It should come as no surprise that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were not concocted at the UN, but in the halls of the OECD by the DAC.

Instead of the UN, private operations and initiatives like those of Ted Turner and Bill Gates as well as the G-8, etc -- that are serving the West's interests -- are now setting the international development agenda. World leaders fill the hotels in Davos, or at G8 and G20 summits, rather than the UN's halls. We have systematically hindered poor nations from taking control of their own development.

Even more distressing is the fact that we have kept Africa from turning its own resources into wealth, from industrializing, from progress. We have kept our expensive medicines and other technologies to ourselves through high prices and patents. We have short changed Africa by dispatching mosquito bed-nets and micro finance from 5-star hotels. In short: We have kept Africa poor, blocked their efforts to get out of poverty, and made them effectively dependent on us for their own survival. Of course, not only DAC members, but also most NGOs and private businesses will have to take responsibility for this.

Dag Hammarskjöld was "greatly impressed by the new generation of African leaders" of his day, and had high hopes for "the economic potentialities of Africa". Fifty years later, there are no signs of new opportunities that will be handed to Africa for free. The hope again is that a "new" generation will emancipate the continent. Freedom and prosperity must come to Africa from within. Let us pray that it will not resort to quick fixes, revenge, violence and war that, for so many years, have kept it down. And that a reformed UN will once again start speaking for the small countries and keep the powerful ones accountable for signing the Charter, as Hammarskjöld dreamed too many years ago.

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