

'Calendar Propaganda' of Human Rights? Historical Perspectives on the United Nations' Global Observances

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The aim of the conference was to explore the multifaceted history of the United Nations global observances. Since 1959 the U.N. have observed international days, weeks, years and decades which have been dedicated to a variety of causes such as human rights, disaster relieve and disability. What exactly did the U.N. seek to accomplish through these observances, have they been successful in establishing new global agendas and benchmarks for development and human rights, or have they merely served to raise unrealistic expectations? These and other issues were discussed by the three keynote speakers and the four panels of the conference, organised by the research team Rethinking Disability at Leiden University between 14 – 16 June 2017.

The U.N. have been characterised by many as a rigid and uncreative bureaucracy. The opening keynote by THOMAS WEISS (New York) aimed to provide a more balanced view of the world organisation, based on findings of the U.N. Intellectual History Project. Weiss argued that the U.N. has been a source and locus of new and evolving ideas that did have tangible impact, for example on human rights, gender quality and peace. Although the pioneering intellectual work in the U.N. has often gone unrecognised, according to Weiss this should not detract from the overall positive impact of the U.N. Can these findings then also be replicated in the history of the global observances?

The second keynote by STEVEN JENSEN (Danish Institute for Human Rights) ad-

ressed two central themes of the conference through a discussion of the International Year of Human Rights (1968). In the historiography, the 1960s have been overlooked as an important decade for the evolution of human rights, unjustified according to Jensen. In the 1960s the colonial, the anti-colonial and the postcolonial intersected and overlapped, creating a window of opportunity for countries in the global south to play a key role on the international stage. Jensen focussed particularly on the initiative of Jamaica to establish the 1968 Year of Human Rights. For this newly independent country, human rights provided a blueprint for domestic development as well as the opportunity to play the role of moderate intermediary between the emerging non-aligned countries and the West. Jamaica quickly lost its moral authority due to domestic troubles, but the International Year and its preparations did enable the better-known human rights revolution in the West in the 1970s. In Jensen's view, neither the 1960s nor the 1970s can therefore be seen as a sudden breakthrough moment for human rights. Instead, he urges scholars to study the emergence of human rights in its wider historical context.

After the keynotes addresses, the first paper in the first panel by NED RICHARDSON-LITTLE (Exeter) explored the engagement of the German Democratic Republic with the International Year of Human Rights (1968). Through the implementation of a new constitution, the ruling Socialist Unity Party aspired to mark the country's successful transition to socialism and demonstrate its commitment to the U.N. human rights covenants. By appealing to the recent wave of anti-colonialist human rights activism in the Afro-Asian world, the GDR also hoped to secure support for U.N. membership and escape its diplomatic isolation. As Richardson-Little showed, the process of integrating a legalistic conception of socialist human rights into the official state ideology carried little success in the way of gaining international backing, but it did convince the SED of its righteousness in the field of human rights while also laying the foundation for the more contentious human rights discussion of the 1970s.

ANNA DERKSEN (Leiden) examined the

motives and actions behind the first U.N. International Development Decade (1961-1970). While contemporary evaluations of the decade were marked by disappointment since little had been achieved in terms of more equal economic development, Derksen described the period as an important turning point for the institutional and political build-up of an international aid system. Analysing the motivations behind the establishment of new bilateral development agencies in northern countries, Derksen distinguished between a 'realist' and an 'idealist' approach. While the North American approaches to development aid were closely entangled with national security and economic profit, the Scandinavian countries took a more altruistic stance. As Derksen noted however, generous development assistance itself could also serve as a tool of soft power in international politics.

The second panel of the conference looked more closely at the relationship between the local and the global levels of international observances. The paper by PETER VAN DAM (Amsterdam) analysed the success of the Fair-trade movement in the global north. Following negotiations on the U.N. level, the movement itself began in 1968 as a local initiative by Dutch activists who urged consumers to take a personal responsibility for more global economic fairness. In the global north the consumer had become a powerful identity that cut across older religious, gender and political identities and the movement quickly spread across Europe. The U.N. Decade for Women (1976-1985) tied the issues of economic and gender inequality closer together and provided the Fair-trade movement with greater visibility. Yet, discussions within the women's decade between First and Third World activists revealed that it would be difficult to establish a common perspective. Propelled by these difficulties and new economic crises in the 1980s, the Fair-trade movement instead came to focus on regional causes of economic inequality and re-shifted itself to the issue of global trade relations.

LUKAS SCHEMPER (Vienna) explored how a group of American scientists successfully lobbied the U.N. for the establishment of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (1990-1999). The idea for an inter-

national decade was first proposed by Frank Press, a geo-physicist and president of the National Academy of Sciences. For Press the aim of the decade was to connect science and politics and advise states on measures to reduce the impact of natural disasters. Frank had not envisaged the decade as a U.N. observance but since many states considered disaster reduction an a-political issue, the U.N. quickly adopted the initiative to improve its image. This prompted the establishment of a new U.N. institution, the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, but it also re-oriented the decade towards socio-economic issues and a development-based approach.

The paper by SAM DE SCHUTTER (Leiden) provided a critical evaluation of the global/local dichotomy in historiography and policy-making by analysing the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities (1999-2009). This decade was proclaimed by the Organisation of African Unity in response to the previous U.N. Decade of Persons with Disabilities. The new decade aimed to provide a local approach and local solutions, and contrasted this strategy with the presumably global approach of the U.N. decade. As De Schutter showed, the distinction between the 'global' character of the U.N. decade and the 'local' character of the African decade was much more complicated. In both cases global agencies assisted local efforts but simultaneously relied on (local) aid-workers' knowledge and expertise, and ability to improvise and work autonomously. De Schutter therefore concluded that scholars studying U.N. observances should shift away from the general texts produced by the Assembly and look closer into how development programs are implemented on the ground.

Opening the third panel on observances and minority groups, VERONIKA FLEGAR (Groningen) compared how disabled refugees were perceived by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees during the World Refugee Year (1959-1960) and the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981), and how this perception affected the international protection activities that were undertaken. According to Flegar, archival research suggests that the protection of refugees since WWII emerged not only on purely altruistic motives. Instead a se-

lection took place that mainly allowed healthy and 'fit-to-work' refugees to re-settle. Flegar suggested that to convince states to accept refugees and create durable solutions, appealing to human rights might therefore be less effective than framing the arguments in economic terms and emphasizing individual economic value.

In the next presentation DAVID KILGAN-NON (Galway) focused on the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981) in Ireland. Among Irish disability activists the IYDP has been remembered as a failed opportunity to capture public attention and implement concrete measures. Instead, according to Kilgannon, the unrecognised long-term success of the IYDP lay in the way it shaped the orientation of all later public policy around disability. In the 1980s the Irish state assumed a fundamental duty to assist people with disabilities, whereas previously this responsibility had been relegated to family members and the local community.

ANNE KLEIN (Cologne) presented a critical evaluation of the current Western human rights discourse on disability. According to Klein, in recent years the social model of disability that has been established since the 1970s has come under pressure by new reproductive technologies. These enable in vitro genetic screening and preventive selection, promising a future without disability. To Klein, these technologies undermine society's cohesion because they are denigrating to certain individuals and groups with these disabilities. The resulting democratic erosion, she argues, is not accounted for by the current Western human rights discourse. For a possible political and ethical solution to this challenge Klein pointed towards the notion of solidarity developed by the philosopher Axel Honneth, which construes solidarity, an act of 'active sympathy'.

In the third and final keynote address, MARIE-BENEDICTE DEMBOUR (Brighton) presented her typology of four schools of thought on the nature of human rights, consisting of the Natural, Protest, Deliberative and Discourse schools on human rights. According to Dembour, each school represents a different view not only on the source of human rights, e.g. natural law or politi-

cal accord, but also on the history of human rights and on the role of the international observances. From the viewpoint of the Natural School, observances serve to fill the gaps left by existing human rights. For the Protest School, observances function as a re-start or reconfiguration of human rights legislation of which the outcome is always uncertain. The Deliberative school may be said to regard observances primarily as opportunities for agenda setting in an ongoing process of human rights politics. The Discourse School finally regards the observances with scepticism, arguing that human rights in general fail to deliver on their promises and that true historical change happens 'underneath' the surface of overt political events and international agreements. In addition, Dembour emphasised that many scholars do not adhere to one thought school exclusively and that these seemingly contradictory viewpoints may overlap with each other.

In panel four, ANAÏS VAN ERTVELDE'S (Leiden) paper on the International Women's Year (1975) in Belgium explained the ambiguous appreciation of this U.N. observance. Contemporary women's organizations largely regarded the Year as a failure because it had not brought the structural changes they had hoped for. This perceived shortcoming resulted in a loss of confidence in (inter)national political structures among women activists and in the second half of the 1970s they turned away to set up alternative, autonomous structures. In contrast, the follow-up International Women's Decade and the intermittent World Conferences are remembered much more positively by both activists and women politicians alike as breakthrough moments in the professionalization and institutionalization of women organizations, raising awareness of feminist issues in the global south, and prompting institutional and legislative changes in Belgium. The historic connection by the Women's Year and the subsequent Decade is thereby rarely acknowledged.

PAUL VAN TRIGT (Leiden) compared the conception of human rights in the U.N. General Assembly during the World Population Year (1974) and the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981). During both ob-

servances more social-economic equality between developed and developing countries was seen as an important part of dealing with the respective objectives of both years, namely population control (1974) and improving the lives of persons with disabilities (1981). Only in the decades afterwards when developing countries lost influence in the G.A. due to the impact of the economic crisis was there a shift towards a human rights approach. Contrary to Samuel Moyn's well-known thesis, Van Trigt proposed that this development should not be interpreted as a shift to a new utopia. While the utopia of a more equal world now seemed impossible, human rights still carried the promise of more equality between individuals yet precisely without any broader underlying utopian vision.

The final paper by MONIKA BAÁR (Leiden) focused on the artwork, photo journalism and stamps that were produced for the International Year of Women (1975), the Year of the Child (1979), and the Year of Disabled Persons (1981). According to Baár, the U.N. observances reflected a new form of PR activity, marking a turn to representational politics. They signalled a belief in the U.N. that policymaking should be backed up by communication to a global public. Posters, photography and stamps functioned as cheap, tangible, modest and presumably universal media. In this way these artworks appear to have contributed to a translation of the language of human rights into visual languages. Nonetheless, Baár pointed out, neither (abstract) art, photography nor even the language of human rights itself was ever completely universal or ideologically neutral.

Conference overview:

Introductory remarks
Monika Baár

Keynote 1

Thomas G. Weiss, 'UN Ideas That Changed the World'

Keynote 2

Steven L.B. Jensen, 'Global Crossroads. The 1968 UN International Year for Human Rights and the New World of Sovereignty'

Session 1 Observances and world politics

Chair: Anaïs van Ertvelde

Discussant: Alanna O'Malley

Ned Richardson-Little: Self-Determination as Socialism: East Germany, Decolonization and the International Year for Human Rights'

Anna Derksen: The First UN Development Decade (1961-70) and the Shaping of an International Aid System

Session 2 Observances and global policies

Chair: Paul van Trigt

Discussant: Vincent Lagendijk

Peter van Dam: Propelling fair trade towards its limits: the fair-trade movement and the United Nations Decade for Women, 1976-1985

Lucas Schemper: Establishing the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction: how scientists put disaster on the UN agenda

Sam de Schutter: The Disappointing Decade. The Evaluation of the UN International Decade of Disabled Persons from an African Perspective

Session 3 Observances and minority groups

Chair: Anna Derksen

Discussant: Susan Legêne

Veronika Flegar: International Protection during the World Refugee Year (1959-1960) and the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981): Disabled Refugees as Victims of the Past or Agents of Their Future?

David Kilgannon: 'Surely during this international year, some things have to finally change': Irish disability activism and the United Nations' International Year of Disabled Persons (1981)

Anne Klein: Love, rights and solidarity „after the boom“. Exploring the critical potential of disability history for studying human rights in Western societies

Keynote 3

Marie-Benedicte Dembour, 'The Limits of Human Rights'

Roundtable: From propaganda to law. Exploring a new research agenda, with contributions by Yvonne Donders, Veronika Flegar, Barbara Oomen, Marlies Hesselman and Mando Rachovista.

Session 4 Observances compared

Chair: Sam de Schutter

Discussant: Salvador Regilme

Anais van Ertvelde: The International Women's Year (1975), The International Year of Disabled Persons (1981) and their follow-up: from failures in time to rhythmic normalization

Paul van Trigt: 'Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing' A Comparison between the World Population Year and the International Year of Disabled Persons

Monika Baár: Visualizing the UN's Observances - Visualizing Human Rights

Final discussion

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