



When only the Sky is the Limit

by Kerstin Leitner
drawings by Sigrid Hacker

To my parents in gratitude

These memoirs cover the period 1975–2005 and were completed in 2009. They are thus a historical record. The world has moved on as have the UN. What I have written is based on my personal recollections and from my personal perspective. All views expressed are thus mine and should not be interpreted as those of the UN or any other institution or authority mentioned. I have not wanted to offend anyone in the way I describe my actions and interaction with others during my work for the UN. Should I not have succeeded in this, I apologize and ask for indulgence of my subjective view of things past.

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When only the Sky is the Limit

Memoirs of a Nomadic
International Civil Servant
Working for Global Peace
and Development
1975 - 2005

by Kerstin Leitner
drawings by Sigrid Hacker

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Kerstin Leitner has worked as a staff member of the United Nations for 30 years from 1975–2005. This is in and of itself not exceptional as many thousands have done so since the founding of the UN in 1945. Others have written about their experience, as Ms Leitner does in her memoirs. What makes hers interesting to read is the fine combination of practical work and reflections of why the UN is such a unique place to work for. In a low key approach she shows time and again that when working in Africa, the Arab world, China and when introducing modern information and communication technologies globally to the UN, things appear very similar to work in other, national and socio-economic settings and yet they are distinctively different. Ms Leitner's years with the UN span part of the Cold War era and the post-1989 period, when only one superpower remained and the market economies of the Western world began to dominate the global economy. As a German, she was among the first to serve the UN after the two German states joined the world organization in 1973. As a woman, she was among the first generation that broke through the glass ceiling for women and rose to the senior management level. Her memoirs end in September 2005. They are thus a historical document, but one which helps to understand the ever evolving world of today and the role of the UN in this global setting.

Sigrid Hacker has contributed 8 drawings to this book. By way of background she writes: "The complexity of the work which Kerstin Leitner describes in her memoirs is not easy to capture if one does not choose the means of documentation like photos and film. For me, the basic conditions of human life, the right to food, shelter, respect of customs and cultural traditions run through Kerstin Leitner's text and these I wanted to capture. I was fascinated by her statement that her life was a journey with an unknown destination, a permanent adventure."

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Greening the desert – a futile undertaking?

I. Introduction:

Development Cooperation

Waste Or Necessity?

Writing this book was prompted by comments from many younger colleagues, and later on by my students. They suggested that I should write up my experience of working for 30 years with the United Nations in the field of development cooperation. When young staff joined us or classes began, my younger colleagues and students knew close to nothing about the complexities of the UN system and the excitement to work for the UN. They had an idea about the Security Council and the peace operations, but everything else was shrouded in mystery. They also were always curious to learn, in particular my female colleagues and students, how I had combined my international nomadic life with the demands of family and personal relationships. Although I shall focus my attention on the professional aspects, I shall give glimpses of how a modern nomad combines professional and personal life. In particular, I shall show how the world shrinks when one lives and works internationally. While there were moments of loneliness and alienation, anxiety and self doubt, they probably were not more frequent than had I led a more conventional life. On the whole –when I look back–life was very fulfilling.

This book is thus intended to inform and to encourage those young readers who are toying with the idea of working internationally to go ahead and to seek the adventure. I also hope that I can convey the special professional demands which a life-long career in an international organization and in the field of development cooperation make. Many of my compatriots know the places I worked and lived in from touristic travels. They often conclude that working in Africa, New York and China is a constant holiday. As my readers will see, life in those duty stations was and is far from a permanent vacation. Long hours of sometimes grueling work, exceptional managerial challenges, tropical disease, civil strife and other adverse local circumstances made every day a special experience. But in spite of the hardships there were many rewards: the meeting of wonderful people, the opportunity to become familiar with the cultures of other countries, and certainly the

occasional sense that our efforts did make a difference to a number of people and for them the world a better place.

Before I begin to tell my personal and professional experiences, I would like to briefly describe my view of development cooperation. After all, I devoted most of my professional life to this field of activities which was little known to me before I entered it and it is in fact little known beyond those who are engaged in it.

What is development cooperation?

Most people in OECD countries consider it a waste of time and resources, yet many people living in abject poverty in developing countries are thankful that they receive some help and support to lift themselves out of their miserable living conditions. Some, in particular government officials and politicians, are resentful of the *meddling* attitude of development experts, program staff and managers who insist on personal integrity, transparency of systems and observance of human rights. Steering a constructive course between these three perceptions and staying faithful to the principles of the UN Charter or in the case of bilateral donors to their countries' constitutions and policies is a constant challenge. Keeping a critical distance to specific economic and political interests and avoiding high-handedness is another constant concern to all professionals conducting development cooperation. Last but not least, maintaining credibility by responding, yet with a critical mind and eye, to demands of recipient governments or partners is an ongoing concern.

Development cooperation is a tricky business. By definition it has to be open to put in question the status quo. It has to be grounded in the national society—both in the donor as well as in the recipient country. It has to set in motion a self-sustaining process of change and improvements in working style and practices, and it has to result in better living conditions at least for the vast majority of the population. It has to open greater opportunities for everyone to participate in the development process. All this needs to be done with scarce financial resources and often a lack of relevant knowledge, creativity and the willingness for change by those who take decisions. Development cooperation is a constant learning process. Its origin is the desire to assist newly independent countries in their nation-building efforts, and to

enable these countries to participate as equals, economically and politically, in the international community of nations. It is a combination of altruistic benevolence and the demands for hard-nosed economic and social policies and their implementation. An ever more sophisticated set of management rules and practices is to be applied in order to setting standards and rules which apply to all those who work in the field of development cooperation.

Is development cooperation a good thing?

Doubts over whether development cooperation is a good or a wasteful use of public funds are periodically recurring. But overall, I would agree with a retiring German official who stated at his farewell party sometime in the 1990s that the 20th century was a century of many wars, disasters and catastrophes, but that later generations might look upon this period and think that development cooperation was one of the few positive features of this century. Indeed many professionals I met and with whom I worked closely together were devoted to giving countries a helping hand on their way to a better future.¹ The leaders of the developing countries had not chosen either goals or means on the basis of the dynamics of their own societies, but rather as part of a colonial past or in an effort to compete with the rich countries of this world in order to emulate their successful economies. When they adopted the practices and rules of more advanced countries, they had nevertheless to modify them to suit their own needs, culture and conditions. Very often, development cooperation serves as the vehicle that such modifications respond to the immediate demands of the powers

¹ Often the motivation of development professionals is called into question. Many outsiders believe that it is the high salaries which attract them to this type of work. It is correct, that in particular in the early years of development cooperation during the 1960s/70s, salaries for experts serving overseas were generous. But it is equally correct that many serve as volunteers and receive a salary which allows them to live comfortably in their country of assignment, but does not permit big savings for the time after their return. In any event in the vast majority of cases, people chose this professional life because they wanted to see other countries and experience other ways of life, and apply their professional knowledge and skills in other social and cultural settings. For most, it became only known that they received salaries and bonuses which they would not have received at home, after they had signed up. Besides, those with families and children of school age also had higher expenses. Overall, it is safe to say that all things considered those working in or for publicly funded development cooperation programs are not better paid than their counterparts back home.

that are in place in the developing countries, but also to the demands of a long-term process of sustainable social and economic development. While politicians and senior civil servants can by now articulate this demand quite well, there is still a huge gap between this articulation and the implementation of such concepts. Development cooperation is called upon to fill the gap in developing countries which represent the majority of the world's population. Filling this gap despite often limited resources is still an inspiring ambition. Development programs and projects are driven mostly by altruistic motives. Even though there are political pressures on those selecting programs and projects, once these programs and projects are up and running, technical and professional considerations take over and neutralize such political pressures from either the donor's or the recipient's side. But projects can be poorly designed and waste scarce and valuable funds. On a few occasions, I had to stop ill-designed projects. On many other occasions, I had to correct the course of programs and projects. From time to time, there were moments of self doubt and unanswered questions to myself whether our programs were achieving the high goals which we had set for them. Yet, only remaining in motion and trying again was the appropriate answer to these doubts.

Prerequisites and the rationale for development cooperation

Technical development assistance and/or cooperation is in essence a combination of excellent professional knowledge and skills in a given field combined with a high degree of understanding for the political realities, both in the funding country/organization as well as the receiving country or institution. The needed funding is provided in most cases on a grant basis. This aspect of not having to repay the related costs is often critically discussed in political circles. Those who argue against continuing this practice say that freebies have little or no value to those receiving it. Those who argue for grant funding say that otherwise many changes would never be initiated. I belong to the latter group of people; but I also subscribe to the notion that approving grant assistance and designing programs and projects for such funding need to meet the highest professional standards.

The original rationale for technical assistance was to help newly independent countries and their governments to run their affairs in an internationally acceptable manner. But the cold war rivalry, which started about the same time as decolonization, made the international basis for what was acceptable an ever moving target. Many times a dictator was kept in power and his government was supported, because Western and sometimes Eastern donors wanted to keep a foot in that country. Many fledgling democracies were abandoned, because they chose economic policies which were considered unsustainable or hostile to one of the two cold war camps. Of course, there also was the darling of development assistance, socialistic, grassroots-oriented Tanzania. Under President Nyerere, the government succeeded to satisfy both camps and reap the benefits accordingly. Over decades, Tanzania was the country which received the highest per capita development assistance in the world, the volume of such aid per capita was many times larger than the country's per capita GNP.

Trailblazer for globalization

By now we can look back on 40–50 years of development assistance/cooperation. We can see more clearly than in the past that development cooperation is in many instances the trailblazer for globalization. It is intended to create an international playing field for economic activities across national boundaries, and to contribute to an ever higher degree of commercialization of all aspects of life. Most development professionals no longer ask whether such commercialization is desirable. They know it is necessary to overcome poverty and to secure the survival of a nation, a community, or an individual in the rat race for economic growth, political power and personal success. Development professionals tend to be very observant on cultural differences and mindful of not imposing the cultural standards from the aid giving country on the recipient society. For lack of better knowledge and creative ideas, lack of funds and lack of time, they often are pushed by these constraints to promote uncritically foreign experiences. A modernization of traditional values, customs and practices is too often given short shrift. In countries where a lively dialogue is guaranteed around these issues, e.g. in China, the results and impact of development assistance can be phenomenal. In other countries, like in Africa and the Arab world, where such dialogues are much less intense, results of development co-

operation are less beneficial to those in need of assistance. In the years which I spent in Africa, I was often confronted with the situation that national decision-makers would agree to proposals made by donors, but with little real consent. Consequently, programs and projects got either diverted from their intended goals, or they were languishing. Occasionally, if they hit the right note, they were hijacked by particular interests of individual politicians or officials. But there are ways to respond appropriately to such corruptive practices as well, and to make projects catalysts for the intended and needed social, economic and cultural changes.

Sources of development cooperation

Over the decades, the financial sources of development assistance/cooperation diversified. This happened partly as a means to address the complex issues of peaceful development from various angles, partly to reduce the predominance of publicly funded aid programs with government institutions. Today, sources range from former colonial governments' and OECD countries' ODA budgets to churches, foundations and NGOs. Increasingly, corporate funding under the corporate social responsibility concept of a private company is added to the list of donors. Multilateral organizations like the EU, the World Bank and the UN system, while depending on funding from member governments, are increasingly cooperating with civil society organizations as partners.

All these donor agencies develop their body of professionals, sometimes exchanging their experts, managers and staff. But on the whole, most professionals tend to stay with one organization or at least one sub-family of organizations.

To an outsider this plethora of donors may appear as wasteful and duplicative. Yet, to a seasoned development professional this multitude of agencies can be the instrument to playing a wonderfully productive concert of development initiatives. Regrettably, such a concert does not occur in all situations and then results in a painful cacophony. Therefore, a high amount of time and energy by donor agencies is invested in better coordination and aid effectiveness. Yet, there is also a certain rationale behind all of this proliferation of the same basic concept, namely that the better-off and the ones who know more should

help those who need knowledge and additional resources. In the early years of development assistance, the rationale was that the former colonial powers would better understand the challenges of their former colonies, and that socialist countries would be able to better assist like-minded countries. Multilateral assistance was meant to break the dependence on too much colonial or socialist influence and support. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, set up in the context of the Marshall Plan and later on known as the World Bank, was to “globalize” the positive experience of the reconstruction of post-war Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Church-based organizations, foundations and NGOs, many of whom became active in the late 1970s and especially after 1989, were to deliver programs which would create a level playing field among all nations with regard to their civil society, and to become stakeholders in the programs funded by governments and multilateral organizations. They were welcomed as agents for greater diversity, tolerance and understanding of cultural differences and the interests and needs of the common men and women. Especially in countries with dictatorial regimes or in need of humanitarian assistance after a natural or man-made disaster, these organizations have had difficult times and many of their professionals suffered personally or even lost their lives. They, together with colleagues from organizations like UNHCR or WFP and UNICEF, are the unsung heroes of international development cooperation.

The special features of the UN development cooperation system

Is there a special role and purpose of development assistance to be delivered through the UN system? Yes, there is. Setting a process of development in motion and not being locked into narrowly defined national interests, but serving a broader concept of promoting human well-being is not always and in all countries possible for bilateral donors. Therefore, the UN development system is treading where no one else dares to tread—as a colleague from another aid organization once remarked to me. These cases gave the biggest headache, but also were the most rewarding experiences of my professional life.

In general, multilateral programs serve as agents for opening new avenues for development cooperation. Often the breaking down of walls and the prying open of doors to the outside world is done discreetly without much fanfare and public attention. For instance, some newly independent governments were resentful and did not trust their former colonial masters. In such instances, the UN served as a neutral alternative or go-between. In fact, it was this mistrust which created the technical assistance programs of the UN and ultimately UNDP in 1966.²

Developing countries who were socialist in outlook did not want to be locked into dependence on the exclusive assistance from other socialist countries. The UN could and would open the doors to relevant experience and partners in non-socialist countries and it would give access to countries where bilateral relationships failed. Countries that were members of the non-alignment movement were in particular interested in development cooperation through the UN system and other multilateral organizations. They wanted to choose for themselves which experience of Western and Eastern countries was most relevant to them. The UN may not always have succeeded in bringing the best expertise to these countries. There were many restrictions for experts from Western countries to work in socialist countries and for those from socialist countries to work in countries aligned with the West. But at least the UN programs were a means to this end.

Development cooperation after 1989

With the changes in the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the facts previously described, the role of the UN development system changed dramatically and so did development cooperation overall. From being primarily a partner to developing countries and a bridge over the East/West divide, the UN development system became the focus of assistance to all member states in matters of international development. Of course, there would be no programs and projects in OECD countries funded through the UN system, but there would

² See Craig N. Murphy, *The United Nations Development Program—A Better Way?* Cambridge 2006

be many debates and partnerships with organizations from OECD countries. There would be an increasing number of programs dealing with aspects which applied to all countries. While funding would be made available to developing countries, preferably to LDCs, OECD countries participated with their own resources. All became members in international networks and partnerships. What are UNDP (the United Nations Development Program) and the UN development system? UNDP, the organization I worked in for over 28 years, was created in the mid-1960s to be the central funding and coordinating body of the UN development system at country level. In reality, it neither was the sole funding source for the UN system nor did UNDP always succeed in coordinating all UN system development activities in a given country. Nevertheless, a good faith effort was always made, and the UN resident coordinator system was formally established in the early 1990s and managed by UNDP. The UN resident coordinator system greatly strengthened the performance and presence of the whole UN system at country level, way beyond the importance of its financial resources. On the average, the UN system funds about 3–4 percent of incoming aid to a country. But in terms of political influence, the UN system has a much greater impact. Recipient governments know that UN staff is to be impartial and guided by UN resolutions and decisions taken by all member states—including them. Even bilateral donors often solicit the interventions of UN staff on issues, where they cannot reach the developing country's authorities. They regard the UN as recipients of their government's funding, and consider that UN officials have an obligation to help them in having their programs and policies accepted. Faced with these pushes and pulls, the best UN officials will seek to extend a helpful hand to all parties while keeping a critical distance to them all, and intervening only if and when it furthers the implementation of UN conventions, especially the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the two Covenants on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights and on Political and Civil Rights respectively.

There have been many changes over the period of these 30 years in the way development cooperation in general, and UNDP and UN system development programs in particular, are managed. It would go beyond the scope of this introduction and even these memoirs to elaborate this topic. Very little historical and analytical work by aca-

demic researchers has been undertaken so far.³ But there is one constant feature clearly distinguishable. Whether bilateral or multilateral, whether governmental or non-governmental in funding and outlook, development cooperation has been pursuing peaceful change and development as opposed to military interventions. Not always has such civilian and peace-oriented cooperation worked out. In some instances, through an unfortunate combination of factors, development cooperation may even have contributed towards an erosion of a weak state and unwillingly reinforced the slide into a failed state, e.g. Somalia. Nevertheless, is doing too little worse than doing nothing? I don't think so. Development cooperation is one of the few stepping stones to a world of equal citizens, irrespective of the countries they live in.

The future of development cooperation

Whether development cooperation has a future depends on many factors. Writing these memoirs, China is entering the scene in a big way followed by other emerging economies. Traditional donors are taken more seriously the goal of making 0.7 percent of their annual GNP available for international development cooperation by 2015. But most were not even reaching the half point mark in 2007. More importantly, there is a growing sense and a clearer philosophy that development cooperation has to follow a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, programs need to directly and immediately benefit the poorest segments of the population in developing countries. On the other hand, global threats and issues need to be addressed, such as HIV/AIDS, climate change, and a fairer trade and investment system in which all countries can participate. In addressing global issues at the national level, development cooperation has come full circle: many developing countries lack the expertise and institutional capacity to create favorable conditions for their national economies to participate in the globalization process or deal with international issues, such as climate change mitigation and the HIV/AIDS epide-

³ Fortunately, some historical studies are beginning to appear. There is Craig Murphy's book "The UNDP. A Better Way?" published in 2006, and the publications of the UN Intellectual History project which is led by Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly and Thomas G. Weiss. Their first book entitled "Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges" of 2001 is particularly enlightening.

mic. Therefore, many ODA funded programs and projects are needed to create the necessary capacity and skills. Not all recipient countries are former colonies, and today they do not need help to create a ministry of foreign affairs, finance etc. Today they need a food safety authority or an environmental protection agency/ministry to meet emerging global standards in their products and services and to protect their natural resource base. Countries demand of each other the observance of such standards, especially when they are members of WTO. Countries which do not comply will unwittingly opt out of the international interdependence. Development cooperation has to ensure that countries or even regions do not drop out of the international system. They need to stimulate partnership and dialogue where it is difficult to occur on its own momentum. On the one hand, development cooperation will be in one regard pretty much the same as it was in the 1960s and 1970s, namely focused on national capacity building. But it will also see a growing demand of establishing and maintaining international institutional networks and partnerships among the fittest and the weakest in order to give sustainable global development a chance.

Development cooperation certainly is, in my view and according to my experience, more promising as any military intervention to bring about positive changes. It can engage a multitude of stakeholders, individuals, businesses, governments, politicians, scientists, civil society organizations, in a process of assessing and analyzing conflicts of interest. It can chart a way forward for solving conflicts in a non violent manner. Development cooperation in the future will also be called upon to identify the needs of those who are left behind by market forces and to help them back into the mainstream of global processes. There is most likely a growing and not a diminishing demand for global development cooperation.

Thinking development

Does development cooperation shape the outlook on life? It certainly does. A development professional is deeply convinced that—given the right knowledge and resources—any problem, in particular man-made problems, can be solved. He or she will be mindful that the way towards such solutions is obscured by a variety of interested parties. A

good development professional will therefore always anticipate such conflicts and proceed cautiously. Keeping a free mind and spirit while being open to different views and even solutions is indispensable, listening and hearing what others say is a necessary tool to identify an optimal course of action. The certainty that one will learn something new every day is one of the greatest pleasures of this professional work.

My career with the UN system took me twice to Africa. I began in West Africa and served in Southern Africa. As a student I had spent 18 months doing research in East Africa. Altogether I spent nine years in countries of this wonderful continent. I also lived and worked for UNDP in China twice: the first time in the early 1980s during three years, and the second time from 1998–2003. Undoubtedly these eight years were the highlight of my professional career. Quite exceptionally within the UNDP context, I was assigned twice to UNDP Headquarters in New York for altogether eleven years. The first time (1983–1987) I oversaw and backstopped our programs in Arab countries, the second time (1991–998) I was assigned to our central administration, where my tasks were global in outlook and reach. In the course of my professional career I visited 120 countries in all corners of the globe, experiencing the diversity, but also the similarities in people's life. My career was concluded with a most interesting and challenging assignment at WHO in Geneva, where as Assistant Director-General I was in charge of health and environmental issues, and dealt with globally important issues even more than at UNDP Headquarters.

Although I never planned to take this professional career, I certainly have no regrets that my life did take this course. It was a rich experience, enlightening, exhilarating, frustrating, as Kofi Annan said when he left the office of UN Secretary-General. Working for the UN is always encouraging to keep going. Let me now tell you, what I experienced.



Journey into the unknown—Entering a tunnel without knowing what lies at the other end

II. Chapters In A Modern Nomad's Life

I. The Beginning of a Journey: Cotonou (1975 – 1979)

How did I enter the UN service? By pure chance: I did not plan for it, I did not expect it, it just happened. But what a wonderful thing to happen!

When I was offered a two year assignment with the UNDP as a Junior Professional Officer in Cotonou/Dahomey, I barely knew where this town and country was located, much less something about its history and culture. I also knew almost nothing about the UN and I certainly had no idea that this exciting employment was going to last for almost 30 years. Such ignorance did not hinder me to accept the assignment. In April of the year 1975, I was interviewed for the position in Frankfurt/M by a young personnel officer from UNDP, Michael Caspari, who told me at the end of the interview that he would strongly recommend my recruitment. The Freie Universität Berlin had just approved a last extension of my contract as a junior lecturer without the possibility of a further renewal. The lecturer I replaced was returning from his secondment to a university in China and was resuming his post. I therefore was glad to receive an offer within a few weeks, and I was happy to return to Africa.¹

During my postgraduate studies I had spent one and a half years in Kenya (1972–3) and when I came back from that first stay overseas, I was eager to go out again. My first few months in Nairobi brought entirely new experiences and I lived through a steep learning curve. No tree, almost no plant, no birds or other animal voice was familiar.

¹ I come from a family where many members had lived and worked overseas in the early years of their working life. Most had come back and settled in Germany. I was, however, the first woman in my family to do so. In 1949, my parents and I left the part of Germany where the family had lived for centuries, because we migrated via Berlin from the Soviet Occupied Zone to the British Occupied Zone. Therefore, for me to be on the move from home was normal. It was more important to me to be successful professionally than to going back to Germany and settle there. Interestingly though, young people today consider it quite normal to spend some time or potentially their whole life abroad. What was still exotic to us is now a reasonable option.

Nairobi was a big city, but I could not fathom its rhythm. When I left the enclave of the university to which I was attached, its life around the campus and a nearby hotel, it was almost like living through the learning experience of a second childhood. But I loved it and I was excited about the small and big discoveries of life in an African city. The first time I felt homesick was when almost 14 months into my stay in Kenya, I saw the movie *Cabaret*.² I loved it so much that I saw it twice in a row and a few weeks later for a third time in Tanga in Tanzania. By then, I knew it was time to return home to Berlin.

But what a severe culture shock I had when I returned there. I could no longer relate to the ignorance and lack of interest of my fellow students who were preoccupied with the minutiae of daily life, while I had just returned from a world full of different experiences, which nobody was interested in at all. So, when the opportunity arose to “go out” again, I was ready to sign up.

Proud to work for the UN

I also was proud to sign a contract with the United Nations, although I had never taken notice of UNDP (The United Nations Development Program) and what its mandate was, although I even had been in brief contact with the UNDP office during my stay in Nairobi. When I accepted the invitation for an interview, I raced downstairs to our institute’s library to look up what kind of an organization UNDP was. What I read sounded very promising: UNDP was described as a grant giving development organization with a Headquarters in New York and over 100 country offices around the world. It was devoted to assist governments of newly independent countries with technical advice. A noble mission I found, and one I could easily relate to. Coming out of a student milieu which had protested against neocolonialism and imperialism, while at the same time embracing international solidarity and cooperation, UNDP appeared the ideal place to work on these issues.

However, the beginning of my 30 year journey with the UN almost ended before it began—because of bureaucratic hurdles. New York had informed me to contact a particular travel agency in Berlin on

² This is a film about Berlin in the early 1930s, its social and cultural vibrancy.

Kurfürstendamm which would be authorized to issue my air-ticket Berlin–Cotonou and arrange for the shipment of my personal belongings. Months in advance I had given early October as departure date. What did not arrive was a travel authorization from New York. The UNDP office in Cotonou had sent me a warm welcome letter with useful tips of what to bring and hints of what to prepare myself for, but I was stuck between an office which wanted me to arrive urgently, and a Headquarters which could not produce the required travel documents. Eventually, the travel agency took pity on me and on the basis of my letter of appointment issued a ticket and authorized the shipment of my personal belongings, which fit into two suitcases at the time. Presumably this was not the first case where they had to act in good faith and await the required authorization post facto. I got the first glimpse of what we used to say frequently when dealing with the bureaucratic requirements of the UN system that “it is easier to be forgiven than to ask for permission”.

When I left Berlin on 16th October 1975 I had within a week passed my oral exam for my Ph.D., celebrated my graduation with friends and family and said good-bye to them for the next two years. Little did I know when I arrived in Cotonou that I was embarking on a long lasting career, and in fact a life journey which would ultimately take me to reside in Africa, Asia and the US and gave me the opportunity to visit over 120 countries in an official or personal capacity.

Did I know what I was getting myself into? Not at all! Did I like what I was getting myself into? Absolutely! I arrived in what was still called Dahomey, but two weeks later I lived in Benin. Just prior to my arrival, a military coup under Colonel Kerekou had taken place. The new government formed an alliance with the left-leaning intellectuals rather than the much more powerful merchant class, and decided to establish the Marxist-Leninist Popular Republic of Benin as of 1st November 1975.

Life in Africa – traditional and modern and always a fragile combination

In some ways I very much felt at home. I was back in Africa, which I had learned to love during my stay in Kenya, and I found myself with a group of intellectuals who spoke a political language I could easily relate to. It always gave me a kick to discuss with high-ranking govern-

ment officials first our business at hand and then about some philosophical concepts of Hegel and Marx and whether these applied to Africa's situation or not. We were all new in our jobs and these searching discussions were sincere, albeit somewhat futile among the pushes and pulls of daily life. Among all the international personnel of the UN serving in Cotonou at the time, I had the least problems to adapt to the new political regime.

I also had few difficulties to adjust to life in Cotonou. On weekends I took my car and drove overland, observing traditional ceremonies in villages and visiting markets in small towns. There, among the other items for daily life, disgustingly looking traditional medicines were sold. None of which made any sense to me, but I also was too shy to ask. I had heard about the voodoo cults still being practiced in Benin and I did not want to get involved in something I did not know where it might lead me. I restricted my outings to observing people as they were going about their life. Back in the office, I would on occasion ask my African colleagues to explain some of what I had observed, but they were always reluctant to answer to my queries. In spite of the outward friendliness of Africans, I sensed a glass wall which was separating their life from ours.

Much later a senior colleague from UNESCO, a prince of the royal family of Porto Novo, who lived and worked in Paris confirmed that my perception was quite correct and explained to me the social and cultural traditions along the coast between Porto Novo and Ouidah.

The Director-General of UNESCO, who was married to a Beninese, sent the Prince who was one of the directors at UNESCO Headquarters to Cotonou to document the practices of traditional healers and medicine men. The prince was himself initiated to a very high level in the hierarchy of these traditional healers and for that reason had access up to the level of his initiation. Now he was a staff member of UNESCO and held a university degree from a French elite university.

But even he did not dare to share his findings openly with us for fear of repercussions. At a small lunch at my house he only vaguely described the rites and unwritten rules of this almost secretive society along the West Coast of Africa, from where many slaves had been brought to Haiti and transposed their voodoo culture to that part of the world.

He wrote down the details of his findings, insisting that they would have to be kept under lock and key in the UNESCO archives for 50 years. I guess by then he expected to be dead as well as all those he had interviewed and had shared their knowledge with them.

There were many stories circulating in Cotonou about the power of these traditional medicine men and–women. Settling conflicts by poisoning people occurred fairly often. There were also strong rumors that the President of the Republic had invited traditional priests to make rain from clouds which were hanging in the sky, but were not releasing their moisture naturally.³ The scientific knowledge of these priests was intimately interwoven with their religious duties, and was only open and transparent to those having been initiated into their ranks. The younger generation lost interest in learning these traditional skills and knowledge and it was lost to the modern world. The promises of modern school education combined with the secretive nature and inaccessibility of the traditional intellectual class of the African society made their deep knowledge of Africa's natural environment disappear. Occasionally, Christian missionary made efforts to collect and record this disappearing knowledge, but this was often dangerous for both the Christians and the traditional priest. Nevertheless, one catholic priest had succeeded in extracting from a traditional healer the knowledge about a powerful biological medicine for the treatment of hepatitis, and my boss was one of the beneficiaries of this treatment. When he was eventually examined in Sweden, the doctors could not understand why the medicine had worked. They only could confirm that it was an excellent treatment. But these were only small gains which did not suffice to make traditional medicine and modern medicine truly coexist to the benefit of patients in Africa.

During my trips in Benin and its neighboring countries, I had met several Europeans who had sincerely tried to integrate. Some had lived for decades in an African setting, but they eventually had to realize that they had failed as well. Some never made it back into the Euro-

³ In fact by now it is scientifically proven that through well placed open fires the electricity in the air can be influenced in such a way that the moisture and dust from the fires would concentrate in rain drops and thus rain would fall. These traditional priests had accumulated over generations extraordinary skills and knowledge, but were no longer able to pass on this knowledge to a younger generation, as nobody wanted to work any longer as their apprentices.

pean society, too great was the difference between the two cultures.

Of course, I dismissed the warnings of my other expatriate colleagues that my excursions were dangerous, but I never encountered any adverse or hostile situation. I was more concerned about the reactions of some of my African colleagues, who did not understand why I was interested in a part of their culture that they were trying to leave behind. But overall, my explorations led to my being trusted by “both sides”. When we had a severe conflict among our African colleagues in the office, I was given a mediating role.

Mediating in that conflict gave me a deep insight into the West African culture. I learned that the polite, easy-going Beninese could turn into people who would not shy away from killing someone they hated for whatever reason. The conflict in the office had begun with accusations that one staff member was a kleptomaniac. Small things had begun to disappear and everybody believed that this particular colleague was behind the “thefts”. He had begun to call in sick and was coming to work irregularly. The head of the office asked me to enquire what was going on, and so I called for an informal staff meeting to discuss the matter. To my greatest surprise almost everybody came. Accusations flew openly, but remained unconvincing to me. I ended the meeting by saying, that either these unproven accusations had to stop or we had to call in the police to investigate. This gave us a respite for a while. In the meantime, I spoke to some of the informal leaders among the staff. I already knew from my time in Kenya that those put into a specific position of authority by foreigners were not necessarily respected by their African subordinates in that position. Africans used other criteria in choosing one of theirs to be in a leadership position. This could be his or her family background, a natural talent for leading people or good connections to the powerful in the country.

When I was conducting these informal talks, I heard to my horror from several staff members that the colleague who was accused and was staying at home had apparently been poisoned, and was seeking medical treatment from traditional healers. When I enquired why the conflict had taken this ugly turn, I was told that he had jumped the line and accepted a promotion from the expatriate management of the office, which according to them he was not entitled to. I was amazed and reported my findings to the head of the office. A delicate situa-

tion now needed to be managed in a way that this well-performing colleague could be kept, and that he was safe from further hostilities. At the same time the authority of the management team, then entirely expatriate, was at stake. I did not belong to the management group at the time, and thus could speak to both management and staff. The way the issue was ultimately resolved was that the part of the office in which this colleague had been promoted, was restructured so that the other one, who was claiming a higher recognition would nominally be promoted, while the other colleague would retain his position, and in particular his pay, to which he was entitled due to his excellent performance. I don't think we had resolved the deeper lying problem in the office, but at least we had a workable solution. Over the years, I came to realize that African society was full of these compromises which never really settled a conflict or dispute, but let life go on. Accumulating over the years the ambiguities and ambivalences resulting from such decisions are deeply affecting the credibility and legitimacy of any management or, *mutatis mutandis*, political decision. Many problems of the African society and political system stem from the fact that there is no clarity as to which values and principles are guiding decisions. This in turn leads to arbitrariness and a lack of transparency which even today is haunting many African countries.

My work and its environment

I shared my first workplace with all the filing cabinets of the office. As a result I had many visiting colleagues, who came when they needed to consult a file or when a secretary chose to do her filing. Of course, this had the advantage that I met in short time many of my colleagues from all sections of the office. As my responsibilities enlarged, and I was entrusted with the monitoring of a set of projects, the situation, however, became dysfunctional. Each time I had in my office a project officer or chief technical advisor for consultations,⁴ either other staff could have access to the office's files, or we had staff eavesdrop on our conversation/discussion. Eventually, I "graduated" and was given my own office.

⁴ This was the official title of the expatriate project managers, as their national counterparts were to serve as project directors/managers.

Cotonou in the mid-1970s was a place which expatriates either loved or hated. Those who hated it, left after a few months; those who loved it, stayed for years. I belonged to the latter category. Altogether I spent four years in Cotonou rising from a JPO position⁵ to become a full-fledged program officer and leaving it as an Assistant Resident Representative: a rather unusual and steep advancement within one office. When the Resident Representative left, the government informally enquired whether I could become his successor. Fortunately for me that was not possible, as I certainly did not want to undertake my whole UNDP career in Cotonou. I was eager to move on and enrich my experience.

Working in Cotonou provided a variety of fascinating opportunities. There were the senior civil servants who had studied in France during the years of the student revolt of the 1960s and whom President Kerekou was now asking to run the country in a better way than previous governments had done. Many of these intellectuals were badly prepared for such public service and were interested in leaning on the UN system to learn the ropes—even in such a big scale that at one point in time they wanted all foreign assistance which the country received to be channeled through the UN. Politely we declined such a responsibility fully realizing that donors would not accept such a pivotal role for the UN development system. In particular France, as the former colonial power and biggest donor to Benin, was eyeing us jealously. Aid harmonization was not yet invented during the late 1970s. Cold war and postcolonial considerations was the mainstay of development policies and aid at the time. Benin, which held little strategic importance except for serving as an entry port for several of the Sahelean countries (mostly for Niger and partly for Upper Volta which later became Burkina Faso), and increasingly Nigeria were only of interest to a small group of donors. Apart from France, Germany and the Soviet Union were the biggest bilateral donors. The US withdrew because of the left-leaning policies and politics of the Kerekou government.

⁵ Junior Professional Officers were young professionals who were sponsored by their governments for normally two years. They held a contract with the UN organization, but were considered to be on loan and not full-fledged UN staff. Only few were taken over by the UN system after their JPO contracts ended. But even those who did not continue with the UN often stayed in the field of development cooperation working either with bilateral or other multilateral organizations.

Nevertheless, the UNDP office and the hand-full of other UN organizations with local offices played a major developmental role and served as the information hub for even those who only reluctantly accepted us in this role.⁶

Another exciting aspect of life in Cotonou was the international composition of the UN personnel. We had almost as many nationalities as we had staff assigned. There was an active social life within the foreign community, which became even more intensive when, after a mercenary attack on Cotonou, movements for foreigners were restricted. Benin was considered the Quartier Latin of French-speaking West Africa and a comfortable place for an expatriate to live in. Even at the height of the Marxist-Leninist revolution, the importation of French wines, cheeses and other delicacies never stopped. Hence, it was easy to entertain and we often had the most elaborate dinner parties or Sunday picnics on the beach. The French cultural center continued with its programs and we thus saw many of the classical French movies in an open-air cinema. Of course, the closeness of the community also led to intense personal relationships. Several marriages broke up and new partnerships were formed and not all of these changes were handled in a peaceful way. One weekend two UN expatriate staff members were chasing each other through the dusty streets of Cotonou with their official cars, because one had taken the other's wife as his lover. After this incident, one was reassigned immediately and the other was reprimanded.

Apropos cars, the first Kerekou government was trying hard to reduce undue privileges of the civil servants. They instructed the police to take off the road all cars with government license plates on weekends unless the driver had a special permit. On Mondays, the local paper published the list of cars which the police had stopped and taken into custody. Our official cars fell under this ban. UNDP had chosen to register all project vehicles with government license plates (since they were given to the government as part of the aid package). International project personnel often disregarded the government decree, thereby offending a similar UN rule concerning the use of official cars for

⁶ I recall that at one point to everyone's amazement in the UN community, the local head of the French aid organization came to my office and asked for some information. This was a visit unheard of until then.

private purposes on weekends. Being staff in the local UNDP office we always read with great amusement the Monday paper in order to see which of our project cars had been impounded. Many international staff came to the office and wanted us to change the registration. However, as the government's policy was the same as the one in force for the UN, we saw no reason to make alternative arrangements. Eventually, the government's resolve fizzled out, much to our regret.

Several events marked my time in Cotonou, quite different from each other in content and impact. One was the death of my father, the second was the mercenary attack of Bob Denard in early 1977, and the third was an evaluation of our flagship project in 1978, which aimed at developing rice production in the lower swampy valley of the Oueme River.

Death in the family

When I left Berlin in October 1975, my father had developed difficulties speaking. I wasn't aware of the serious nature of his health problems, since my parents did not live in Berlin and they did not tell me about it over the phone. They did not want to worry me. Occupied with my academic exams and the preparations for my departure, I did not ask. I thus totally ignored that he was struck with a deadly ailment, ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease. Although I had left at the beginning of October, I flew home for Christmas, when I realized for the first time how sick he was. In March 1976 he turned 60, and I decided to fly home again, not knowing how much longer he was going to live. The family and friends had gathered and we made the best of the occasion, although my father at that time was already quite handicapped. When I left, we said "good-bye" in the hope that we would meet again in September for my mother's birthday. But I did not see him again, as he died a few days before I arrived on my leave. When the information of his death reached me, I made immediately arrangements to fly out from Cotonou, but could not get a flight to be there on time for the funeral. But at least I was there for my mother and could assist her with all that needed to be done. She had cared for my father at home and had lost a lot of weight. I was concerned about her health and we decided to drive into the Alps for a few days so that she and I could catch our breath. She then moved into a new house which my

father had built for their retirement. We agreed that after her move she would come to Cotonou and stay with me over Christmas there. It seemed to be the best I could do to make her cope with the death of my father.

She arrived in mid-November. The totally new environment, the care of my household staff and the balmy tropical weather helped her to mourn while at the same time to regain her physical strength. The Christmas days we spent in a nature reserve up North on the border to Niger and Burkina Faso. UNDP was supporting the national park administration in the management of the nature reserves, and the project manager had invited us to stay with them in their camp. When approaching the park, we saw a broad front of smoke moving in our direction. It was obvious that a bush fire was approaching. The question was what to do? Since the smoke was moving our way turning back was not much help. Going forward was dangerous, but at least we would see which way the fire was going. I noticed that the wind was blowing from our left to our right, so chances were good that the fire would veer off from coming directly towards us. Fortunately, it did. As we continued, small fires were still smoldering on either side of the unpaved road. We passed one jeep which was totally burned out, and we watched the storks following the path of the fire, picking out of the ground whatever delicacies it was holding for them. It was a truly scary moment, and not one that I ever wanted to see repeated.

When we reached the camp, we were told that the park rangers had set the fire—but in the wrong place. The expert in charge of the UNDP project, our host, was full of shame and apologized profusely. He quite understandably was upset, and probably worried about what I would report to the FAO representative, his boss, upon our return to Cotonou. Based on my report, the training funds for national personnel serving under the project were increased and we wrote off the jeep which, of course, had been one of ours. The rangers had abandoned it when they noticed that the fire was going in the wrong direction and fled on foot, which had saved their lives.

A neo-colonial nightmare: Bob Denard's mercenary attack

After the departure of my mother in early January 1977, staying home with a cold the following Sunday morning, I noticed around

8 a.m. that people were rushing from the direction of the airport towards the town center. After a short while traffic stopped altogether. We had heard that the President was out of town, and I was wondering whether he was coming back, although there were normally few traffic restrictions put in place when he traveled around town. About half an hour later, I saw the most unusual sight: African men with huge boxes on their heads walking along the airport road followed by white soldiers a few paces behind them with rifles under their arms. It looked like a picture from days long past. As I was still marveling over this sight, I closed one of the doors leading towards a small balcony, and within seconds a spray of bullets hit my bedroom wall. I dashed downstairs trying to ring friends to find out what they knew, but the phone was dead. Nobody was in the street and so I did not dare to go to my friends who lived around the corner. Good thing I stayed put, because when I was looking out the window I saw two French-speaking soldiers mounting a machine gun inside my gate and pointing it down the street. While they did so, one was saying to his companion, "I am thirsty and they don't even have a fountain here!" At that very moment shots rang out, and by then it was quite clear that some armed attack was happening, but who was attacking whom?

By mid-day, the soldiers collected their machine gun and a car came to pick them up taking off towards the airport. Slowly normal traffic resumed and my friends whom I had not been able to reach earlier came over to find out from me what I knew. I waited a bit longer and then took one of the office cars which was parked in my garage and drove over to the residence of the resident representative. He was not sure whether he should be angry or relieved to see me driving up to his front door. His residence was much closer to the President's palace than mine, and he and his family had heard shooting for hours, although they, too, did not know what was happening. We then listened to *France Inter* and learned that a group of mercenaries had landed in Cotonou. As I had been able to circulate freely, my boss drove to the office later in the afternoon while he asked me to return home. Then our nightmare started: around 6 p.m. a general curfew was announced and some of our colleagues had been arrested by the militias, who had mounted road blocks all over the city by late afternoon. These experts had gone out to visit other expatriates in order to find out what was going on. In their hurry they had forgotten to take identification pa-

pers, and were thought by those controlling the roads to have been part of the attackers. Eventually, we got them out of prison. Then rumor were afloat that some of the mercenaries had taken refuge in our office and the army wanted to search our premises. In principle, they had no right to do so, but the resident representative decided to grant them permission. It was good that he did so. The suspicion proved to be unsubstantiated. When we finally were able to reach the offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to lodge a complaint, they were understanding—but also greatly relieved that we had not opposed the army. After all, Benin was ruled by military leaders and not by civilians.

Close to the President's palace, the UN had built a high rise apartment building for UN staff, as prior to the current government there had always been a shortage of housing for expatriate UN staff. Although this was no longer the case, some of our project personnel preferred to live there, because the view over the ocean was beautiful and there was always a breeze coming in from the sea. It so happened that the mercenaries had mistaken the building for an official building and shot at it repeatedly. Mr. Lam from Vietnam, the chief technical advisor for our planning project, lived in an apartment on one of the upper floors. Although the shooting had been quite severe, nobody was wounded, except for Mr. Lam who had had a close call. A bullet had grazed his head and failed to kill him by only a hair's breadth.

Mr. Lam was alone in Cotonou, because he had left his family in Paris, sending his children to school there. When I visited him late on Monday afternoon, he was very excited. Initially, I did not understand why he would be so agitated, after all he had been lucky and had only been very superficially wounded. Then I began to listen to his words and realized that he was about to have a nervous breakdown. The telephones were still not working, a curfew was still in effect, and I had no idea how to reach a doctor. The only thing I could do was to stay with Mr. Lam and listen to the memories of his home country Vietnam that seemed forever lost to him. The longing for his country of origin was overwhelming him. He was telling the history of Vietnam as he saw it, and he was recalling his experiences. It was fascinating, although sad to listen to his accounts of Vietnam's recent history. As the former governor of the central bank of South Vietnam he had no chance to return at that time. He had been evacuated with one of the

last helicopters taking off from the roof of the American embassy in Saigon after the Tet offensive. Listening to Mr. Lam's description of the anxieties and uncertainties of those days was a humbling experience for me. While he was telling his past, the deep sadness shown through over the loss of a life that he would never be able to resume. He had never been wounded during the wars in his country, and he was terrified to die in a place far away from home and his family.

Mr. Lam had been educated in France. Therefore, he had settled in Paris. Through various contacts he succeeded to be recruited as a financial planning expert for the UN project in Benin. The government appreciated his knowledge and unassuming working style, only very few knew his professional background. Mr. Lam had felt safe, but lonely in Cotonou until this Sunday morning of the mercenary attack. It seemed that the trauma he had sustained in 1968 was only now surfacing. We had to evacuate Mr. Lam quickly. But how? Sunday was the only day of the week when Cotonou had a direct flight to Paris, all other connections were either via Abidjan or Lagos. But the borders were closed, and we could not get him to an airport in one of the neighboring countries. Until the middle of the following week, no flights were landing or departing in Cotonou. We thus had to take turns and stayed with Mr. Lam to give him company and some comfort until towards the end of the week we finally succeeded in flying him out on the first flight bound for Paris. Many years later, I always wondered what had happened to him, and whether he had been able to return to Vietnam after the reform process started there.

Condoning forced labor

Now to the other event which almost ended my career with UNDP. UNDP funded and FAO executed an agricultural development project in the lower Oueme Valley over many years. The area was swampy along the border between Benin and Nigeria, and the main purpose of the project was to introduce irrigation for rice cultivation. The UN system provided the technical expertise, the national authorities assumed responsibility for labor and construction material. It was a slow process, but we always considered this cooperation our flagship project—until the time that our colleagues at Headquarters in New York decided to organize an independent evaluation. A team of in-

ternational experts came and consulted our files, our experts and us in the local office. They spoke to government officials in the ministries and they undertook project site visits. At the end of their mission they gave us an oral account of their findings and dropped a bombshell: during the site visits they had heard that the villagers who were supposed to provide their labor in exchange for food aid on a voluntary basis, had actually been forced to provide such labor by the local authorities. UNDP and FAO had quietly condoned forced labor! I was enraged. The project experts were in my office almost on a daily basis, but had never given me the slightest hint of this fact. When I asked them whether they knew about it, they said yes in a way they were aware that the local government officials had difficulties to mobilize the villagers.

Outraged I drove over to the Ministry of Planning and asked our counterparts whether they knew about this. They, of course, denied any knowledge. Distraught I returned to my office. How could I possibly continue to work in a function where I became an ancillary to forced labor? Having grown up in West Germany after the Second World War and among a generation of parents and grandparents who had lived through the Nazi era without ever giving us a convincing account how they could have let the atrocities happen, my conscience was badly bruised through the results of this project evaluation. Somehow I felt personally responsible for not having been able to detect the situation, and to initiate a change in the way the project was run. I began to phrase my resignation letter in my head.

Immediately after the session with the evaluation experts, UNDP and FAO suspended the UN contributions to the project and asked for a formal session with the government to discuss the findings. Our international experts were not pleased, partly because our action could result in the early termination of their contracts, partly because at least some of them did not understand the “fuzz” we were making. The government announced during the meeting that the local officials had been transferred and that the government would take measures that villagers would be providing their labor in future only on a voluntary basis. On our side we did not renew some of the experts’ contracts.

Following these decisions I decided to give the UN system the benefit of the doubt, and stayed on. But I also decided that in future I would

undertake my own monitoring visits to projects, which at the time was not done on a regular basis. In fact, for years UNDP struggled to determine where to budget for the costs of such project visits by its local office staff. Project authorities were reluctant to absorb the costs under the project budgets; office managers were reluctant to fund such visits against the office budget travel account. In each case, it became a major undertaking to find the necessary funding. Eventually, the organization decided that each project should set aside 1 percent of its project funds for monitoring and evaluation purposes, and national governments who sponsored Junior Professional Officers (JPOs) assigned a certain amount for travel purposes to each contract. Only I learned about these arrangements when I was no longer a JPO, but had to manage them!

Staying with UNDP or going home?

I had joined UNDP as a Junior Professional Officer with a commitment for two years. A few months before the end of my contract, the resident representative called me into his office and asked me what my plans were. I said that I liked the work very much and would like to continue to work for UNDP. Failing this, I was ready to return to Germany. Based on this conversation he made a lukewarm recommendation to New York regarding the extension of my contract. I actually had hoped that a renewal or a regular contract would be offered to me, but far from it. Only few JPOs were taken over. Any JPO who showed signs of thinking of alternatives had no chance to be offered a longer-term contract. I thus was getting ready to return to Germany and resume my academic career. However, things took a very different turn.

Towards the end of May 1977, our resident representative was transferred to Mali and a new resident representative for Benin was expected to arrive sometime in June/July. He was a very different type from the outgoing one, who at one point even admitted to me that he had difficulties working with professional women. The incoming resident representative, Per Sjögren, a Swede, made himself knowledgeable about all the staff in the office and could not understand why his predecessor had not recommended me for a regular UNDP appointment, especially as a suitable post was vacant in the office. He understood the system much better than his predecessor and only wanted

to know from me whether I would accept a regular appointment. This I confirmed, but nevertheless continued with preparations for my departure in November 1977. Literally on the day of my farewell party, the offer for a regular appointment came through from New York. I had sold my furniture, my car and was all packed to go. Now this! But I felt I had to be true to my word, and asked for a few days of thinking about it. Eventually, I accepted, but asked for the offer to be faxed to Mali where I intended to visit. Therefore, my previous resident representative could see that it would have been possible for him to get me a contract, if he had wanted it. He was gracious enough to acknowledge that he might have misjudged the situation.

I had learned another useful lesson: while one needed the support from senior colleagues, one also should not give any openings for an unfavorable decision, which women in particular tend to do, by discussing openly all the pros and cons for a change to another position. Later on I had many opportunities to counsel younger women on how to present themselves and state their professional interests clearly, so that their superiors had no “excuses” not to offer them the position they were aspiring.

In November 1977, two years after my arrival in Cotonou, I became a full-fledged UNDP staff member and began a career which at that time was open-ended and unpredictable.

My first reaction was to prove that I was worthy of the appointment. Besides, I felt that I had been given too low an entry grade. To “correct this error”, a speedy promotion was now the only possibility. First I continued on my planned travel home in order to take a break and to restock my household. However, I had barely arrived in Berlin when I received frantic calls from Cotonou urging me to return immediately. The resident representative had fallen ill with hepatitis and had to fly out of the country to recuperate. His deputy had difficulties keeping the show running. A young, very enthusiastic and ambitious American, could not adjust to the slower African way of doing things. Senior government officials were fed up with his constant pushing and pressuring them to do things quicker and differently than they wanted to do them, and in the end had asked for this colleague to be removed.

I did my shopping a bit quicker and returned to Cotonou a good ten days earlier than planned. As I did my rounds I learned that the government had indeed requested for my colleague to be transferred, but they had given the organization time to do so. He did not have the government's trust anymore, but he was not declared *persona non grata*. He was due for reassignment that year, and it was agreed with the government that he would be transferred as soon as possible and that other colleagues would be in charge of the day-to-day contacts with the government. I was by then the only other UNDP international staff member—and obviously a huge share of these contacts fell on my shoulders. One of the consequences was that I had contacts at much higher levels of the government than a junior officer like me would normally have, which continued for the rest of my assignment.

Before Per Sjögren, the resident representative, was evacuated I was asked to see the Minister of Education in Porto Novo, the old capital of Benin. I informed the resident representative and he gave me the permission for this meeting, but urged me not to make any commitments for future assistance. With these marching orders I left for the meeting. The minister, a member of the military government, received me in his military uniform surrounded by several high-ranking officials of the ministry. He indeed had a request for UNDP assistance. However, the request was of a nature which we were not able to accommodate: the minister had set aside some funds and with these funds the ministry had begun to build offices for the National UNESCO Commission. Now the funds had run out and the minister was asking UNDP and other donors for grants to complete the building. Even without the instructions of my resident representative I would have declined the request, because UNDP did not fund the construction of buildings. I also knew that other donors would most likely not respond positively. On the other hand and apart from offices, the building was also intended to house an international library which UNESCO would support with books and periodicals. I therefore advised the minister to start raising funds from individuals and offered to give them a personal contribution. The minister was somewhat surprised but thanked me for this advice. Back in Cotonou, I issued a personal check for some US \$ 200 and send them to the ministry. I do not know how the rest of the funds were raised, but I know that the building was eventually completed.

During the meeting, the secretary of the UNESCO Commission made a humorous remark which to this day sticks in my mind and makes me chuckle. At the time it was unusual to have female officials neither on the UN nor on the national side and the official commented to the minister at some point during the meeting: “Sir, in your government women shine through their absence!” This official, by the way, was transferred shortly after our meeting to become Benin’s representative at UNESCO in Paris. For the military rulers he was too open-minded and challenging. They obviously thought him better suited to represent the country at the Headquarters of an international organization.

In early 1979 it was becoming apparent that it was time for me to move on. But the question was where should I be going? The Director of the Regional Bureau for Africa offered me to go as a deputy resident representative to Gabon, a small duty station, but a great career jump, as this would be the number 2 position in the office. Serving as a deputy would position me to be fast tracked for becoming a resident representative. However, I was more interested in being reassigned to a country and a duty station which would offer a greater variety of development challenges than Gabon. I therefore opted for the second offer to go as assistant resident representative to Abidjan. My strongest interest was to obtain an inter-regional transfer, but how to manage such a reassignment?

Moving on and out of Africa

During the summer I received an opening: I was invited to participate in a training workshop in New York. This gave me the opportunity to visit Headquarters and to meet other senior officials and to learn about other vacancies. One opening interested me tremendously: the post of assistant resident representative in China was advertised. However, in Cotonou I had read about it too late, besides I did not think that I would have a chance. For these reasons I had not applied.

Before I left for New York we welcomed in Cotonou Nessim Shallon and his wife Elsie, who were touring West African countries to convince governments to start a program which he had launched in his last duty station Turkey. The program TOKTEN⁷ aimed at countries

⁷ TOKTEN stands for Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals

that had a huge number of professionals living and working abroad. With the financial assistance of UNDP, these professionals spent all or part of their vacation time to advise institutions or organizations in their home country in their area of expertise. This was a wonderful way to reverse, at least partially, the brain drain from developing countries and to give expatriate nationals who lived and worked abroad an opportunity to make a contribution to the development of their home country. When Nessim came to Cotonou he had already been selected to be the first resident representative of UNDP in China. While awaiting his clearances to come through, he was making this promotional trip. His reputation was that he was the best resident representative the organization had at that time and anyone who had the chance to work for him could consider him or herself to belong to a group of the chosen few.

When I met Nessim and Elsie I was mesmerized by their knowledge, their curiosity about the African culture and his unassuming, yet very convincing style to present his TOKTEN scheme. Having met the Shallons, I was sad that I had not applied for the post in China.

What a surprise then to learn in New York, a few weeks later, that all candidates for the China post had withdrawn. So I offered Manfred Kulesa, then deputy regional director in the Bureau for Asia and the Pacific and a close friend of Nessim Shallon's that I would go, although I had accepted the post in Abidjan. What followed were a few days of frantic negotiations between the Africa and the Asia Bureau and the Division of Personnel, which meant for me a time of anxious waiting for a decision. Eventually, I was called to a meeting with the regional director for Asia who informed me that, although it was unusual that a staff member decided to change a selection process, he would make an exception in my case. To this I replied that I would gladly accept, but would like to inform the regional director for Africa first of this turn of events. I therefore went to see Mr. Doo Kingue and asked him for his understanding that I would give preference to the China post. He readily accepted my decision as it was pretty clear to everybody in Headquarters that once a decision regarding the China office was taken, everybody had to toe the line. That was something I, of course, did not know at the time. But I did earn a few brownie points for having shown this respect for the situation of the Regional Bureau

for Africa, which had to revisit and rearrange all its reassignments in order to fill the gap I was creating.

Nevertheless, the process of cutting me to size was not yet over. The Director of Personnel wanted to see me before I returned to Cotonou. In our meeting, which lasted less than 20 minutes, he told me point blank that he was going to give me a hard time for this unusual way of squeezing into the China post which was considered only to be open for the best of the best! He indicated that I could forget a promotion to P-3 that year for which I was hoping. I was furious. He knew better than I that all previous candidates had declined the offer, and that my willingness to go to China was reducing his headaches. Besides, a promotion was linked to performance more than anything else, so I thought.

I returned to Cotonou a happy person: I would be able to go to China, any development person's dream country (more about that later) and I would work with Nessim Shallon.

The weeks in-between assignments are always the best in a career: daily responsibilities can be transferred, the rounds of farewells and good-byes are bittersweet experiences, giving time to reflections of what had happened during the assignment and what was achieved or remained unfinished. Normally, transfers are combined with home leave and as the end of the year was approaching, I would be able to spend Christmas at home. Exceptionally, the regional director for Africa arranged for a face-to-face briefing between the incoming resident representative David Whaley and me in Europe. We decided to meet in Frankfurt/M where we walked the pre-Christmas streets and talked about Benin and its development challenges. We became so engrossed in our talk that we missed twice the opening hours of the Goethe Haus, and were not able to pay our respect to the birthplace of this great German poet.

Since I left a tropical country to go to a temperate one, I left all my furniture behind and traveled light taking only my clothes, books and household goods, altogether three big boxes. However, this was the last time in my life that I traveled that light, as over the years I accumulated many items which I did not want to leave behind. When I arrived some 30 years later back in Berlin, I had to unpack close to 200 boxes!

At the end of 1979, I was ready for a new challenge. I left Cotonou and as I expected I left Africa with sadness, but also with relief. My stay in Benin was my second, long-term stay in Africa, and I had loved it as much as I had my time in Kenya. And yet, more than in Kenya I felt the wall between us foreigners and the African society. I do not know why the feeling was stronger in Benin than in Kenya. Maybe, because my professional work allowed me more access to the African reality than when I worked as a postgraduate researcher, maybe because I was older and more experienced, but also more curious, and maybe because the West African society, and certainly the traditional society in Benin, was infinitely more closed to outsiders than the tribal groups in East Africa.

It always hurt me to notice that many diplomats and foreign experts held the African values and customs in contempt, which they knew little about and also had little interest in learning more about. Africans in those years, in particular the ones well-educated in the Western system, had an uncanny way of keeping foreigners at arm's length. As a result, Africa until now is denied its rightful place in the global economy and society. Arrogance on the one side and resistance to change on the other only reinforce the destructive forces in the African society. I shall come back to discuss this in greater detail in chapter 4.

For now, I was glad to leave and discover another culture and civilization at the other end of the Eurasian continent. I arrived with great anticipation in Beijing in early January 1980.



Carrying ideas the Chinese Way

2. Carrying Ideas The Chinese Way – Beijing Round One (1980 – 1983)

As a student studying the history and development challenges of the Third World, China always appeared to me as the country which “got it right” after 1949. So many problems which seemed intractable in other developing countries were solved in China, for instance the reduction of water-borne diseases, such as cholera. One of the most efficient investments in public health which has ever been made was that the Communist Party of China under Mao Zedong successfully promoted that people all over China should only drink boiled water. The omnipresence of the huge thermos bottles with hot water everywhere became one of the most successful measures ever to reduce water-borne diseases to a trickle within a few years, even in remote rural areas. There, in addition, water wells were covered avoiding further contamination of the drinking water source for whole villages. During our university studies on China’s development after 1949, we learned of the failed *Great Leap Forward*. Nevertheless, we applauded China’s determination to resist the pressures of the Soviet Union for a large-scale industrialization of the country based on a metallurgic heavy industry. And we admired that China succeeded where Soviet engineers had failed, as for instance in building the bridge across the Yangtze River in Nanjing. We also followed with awe, disbelief and amazement the anti-Confucian campaign of the Chinese students during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. Questioning Confucius in such a radical way was equivalent to questioning in the Western world the Aristotelian philosophy. And who in Europe would ever dare to do this? Little did we, the China admiring students in Western Europe, know about the suffering of many Chinese and the damages these campaigns caused, and we did not realize that the Cultural Revolution destroyed the knowledge of the Chinese about their own country’s history.

In spite of my studies of China’s developmental achievements since 1949, I actually knew very little about the country, its history and culture. All I knew was that China defied our Western way of life, that it had a rich culture of its own which it had fiercely defended against foreign influences and domination and that it had been inaccessible

for most of us for centuries. I knew that there was a Chinese way of life and I was now given the chance to experience it first-hand. What a wonderful opportunity!

First glimpses at the Chinese way of life

I arrived in Beijing in the early morning hours of a cold winter day at the beginning of January 1980, after an 18 hours flight from Frankfurt via Athens and Bombay. In those days China was still really far away! Although being tired from the long flight, I was ready to go and to absorb any new impression which came my way.

As we drove into town my first impressions were mixed. There were aspects which were familiar and others which were strange. There were sights which were beautiful and others which were ugly. There were moments where I doubted that I was in a developing country.

The route from the airport to the hotel where I was to stay until I was assigned an apartment in one of the diplomatic compounds, led us through rural areas into town, then past the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square to the Minzu Hotel where the UNDP office had booked a room for me. The road from the airport to the city limit was made of cement plates separated by tar filled spaces. As the car drove over this road it made the same noise and gave the same little jolts I knew from our rides over the autobahn between West Berlin and West Germany. It created a strange sense of homecoming. Along the way there were other familiar impressions. I smelled the all-pervasive coal dust which reminded me of the air in East Germany, as did the red posters with political slogans which, however, here I could not read. I also understood now the haze made visible by the street lights along Chang'an Avenue, which I had seen on innumerable pictures in Chinese magazines, but never quite been able to explain. The heavy air pollution of this otherwise clear and crisp winter night only lifted, as I later discovered, in the late morning, when all the heating systems in Beijing's residential and office buildings were switched off and the sun would shine from a clear blue sky.

The stretch along the six lane Chang'an Avenue was breath-taking, especially the part where the ride goes along the outer walls of the Forbidden City and the vast expanse of Tiananmen Square. In those

days, the Square was not a tourist destination. Its surrounding buildings were standing gravely and majestically in the foggy yellow lights of the street candelabras as the symbols of the mighty center of China. The avenue was empty except for a few policemen, hordes of cyclists riding to or from work, and a few cars and buses driving with dimmed lights. I was wondering how the driver was finding his way. The street lights were not really sufficient to show any obstacles on the road. Apparently, he was of the same view, as he alternated between switching on his high beams for brief moments and blowing the horn. To these signals the cyclists would respond with the ringing of their bells. As I later discovered, rush hours were always accompanied by a rise in the volume of car horns and bicycle bells.

On later occasions I learned that driving along the old airport road¹ on a summer day was a particular challenge. Here like on many other country roads, farmers used to rest their heads during short snoozes on the side of the tarmac, which meant that cars had to keep a large safety margin and ride in the middle of the road. This was okay, as long as there was no oncoming traffic, but of course there was, and so there were many scary moments during such a car ride. I never understood how anyone could possibly fall asleep so close to the danger of being run over by a car, but this was only one of the many puzzles which the Beijing traffic posed to a Westerner in those days.

Arriving at the hotel, I assumed that I would be given a key to my room. But far from it: a lady opened my room with her key and left. In those days, there were attendants on each floor who would open the doors and lock them when one left. While the guest was in the room the door remained unlocked. Most foreigners considered this as an unacceptable way of controlling their movements, we were rather glad that we could not lose or misplace our room keys, because that could turn out to be very expensive. The management of the room keys gave the hotel personnel an unusually high degree of knowing what the guests were doing, but it was probably as much dictated by the shortage of keys as by the wish to control all movements of guests.

I took most of my meals at the hotel. In those days one had to be punctual to be served, or else one would go hungry. Besides, meal

1 It became the “old” airport road, when a toll collecting six lane highway was built next to it.

times were unusually early for a Western guest. We therefore made it a point to arrive at the last minute which would force the personnel to extend the serving hours. We got away with it for a while, but then the kitchen closed earlier forcing us to eventually comply with the hours that the restaurant staff was willing to serve us or we would not have any meal in the hotel. In the early 1980s that was a serious threat. Only the restaurants of the international hotels were freely accessible to us. Only one coffee shop in the *Beijing Hotel* served sandwiches and other snacks outside the normal serving hours. Of course some long-time hotel residents became very creative in having a small fridge and cooker in their rooms so that they could prepare their own meals. Especially Japanese guests had an easy time to be self-reliant. They just needed hot water and a large bowl of boiled rice in order to prepare themselves a Japanese pre-cooked meal. Some business people even had them in the restaurant to the great amazement of the hotel staff, who had never seen anything like this before.

While the staff was absolutely inflexible when it came to their working hours, they were wonderful hosts once they knew our favorite meals, and always served those with great gusto and in huge helpings. The hotel had originally been built for Soviet experts in the 1950s and the kitchen had retained the preparation of a certain number of “Western” dishes. These in fact were Russian dishes, such as *Chicken Kiev*, which oozed melted butter, or *Baked Alaska* (a pancake filled with a scoop of vanilla ice cream and melted chocolate on top).

I stayed for three months in the hotel waiting that the construction of the residential building in which I was assigned an apartment would be completed. But I would not like to have missed the experience of living in a small hotel room and in a community of guests who with small measures made the hotel quite a cozy home with the tacit tolerance of the staff.

The hotel was in the Western part of town, near Xidan, one of the major shopping streets in Beijing, while our offices were in the Eastern part, Sanlitun. The easiest route took us past the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square along Chang’an Avenue. In the early 1980s this was not a major problem. Motorized traffic was so light that one could easily cover the distance of some 8 or 10 km within 20 minutes. Later in the late 1990s traffic had increased so much that one needed

for the same distance at least one hour and a half even under the best of circumstances. When I left in 2003, taxis were not even allowed to drive during the day along Chang'an Avenue. It was a desperate measure taken by the city administration to reduce the number of cars and to keep the traffic flowing on an avenue which had six and near Tiananmen Square even eight lanes.

When I moved into my new apartment in one of the diplomatic compounds and next door to my colleague Siri Tellier and her husband, I was beginning to make Beijing my home. As much living in a “ghetto” was an unusual experience, it had its redeeming features. We became close neighbors and good friends. Robert, Siri's husband, was a frequent help, changing tires of my car, which were punctured by nails left carelessly by Chinese moving teams when they opened the wooden crates of people moving into the building. We soon also learned how to get around the restrictions for Chinese to visit us in our apartments. We discovered that we would not be stopped when we took them into the compound with our cars, and if we did this at times that the elevator operators had their breaks, we even could succeed to “sneak” them in unnoticed. We often wondered though how much truly remained “unnoticed”.

Apart from helping each other in our daily life—we also had fun. We frequently went on outings together, picnics and even met Chinese acquaintances near the ruins of the old Summer Palace, where we listened and danced with them to Western pop music, until the police came and asked us to leave. Occasionally, we would indulge in small crazy things that only the social restrictions of China on foreigners would provoke. Siri was pregnant with her first child and flew home to Denmark for the delivery. Before she left, she casually asked whether she could bring me anything from Denmark. Equally casually I replied “a six pack of Elephant beer”². I all forgot about this and was looking forward to seeing Siri and her new born daughter return to Beijing. When they arrived, Siri descended from the plane with a huge package of diapers and a six pack of Elephant beer buried in them. To this day we laugh about this small craziness.

² A very strong beer brewed by a well known Danish brewery and rarely found outside Denmark.

My work and working environment

While daily life had its unusual and sometimes amusing challenges, work was nothing but exceptionally exciting. A few days after my arrival, the deputy resident representative, Alan Doss, took me to a meeting with Vice-Minister Jiang Zemin of the Foreign Investment Commission. He had led a group of senior officials on a study mission around the world to examine the experience of free trade zones with UNDP funding support. We were invited to come to the meeting so that the minister could inform us about the results of the study tour. He first thanked us profusely and then proceeded to share with us their major findings. I must admit that at the time I did not fully grasp the importance of this study tour or its outcome. But years later, when Vice-Minister Jiang Zemin had become the President of China, we met him in Baidaihe³ on the occasion of the first visit to China of the then chief executive of UNDP Mark Malloch Brown. The President recalled how important this mission had been for him and his colleagues. They needed this experience to convince other leaders many of whom had a military background, of why it would be in China's long-term interest to change elements of its national policies in attracting foreigners and overseas Chinese to invest in such free trade zones and jumpstart the acceleration of foreign direct investment in China. He explained to us that only on the basis of this first-hand study of experience in other countries, they were able to speak with authority and conviction. A small UN project of about half a million US Dollars thus became the catalyst for a major turn of events in China's economic development in the late 20th century.

Intuitively we had developed an approach that worked very well in China, because it corresponded to the way Chinese individually and institutionally learn. They study pragmatically, looking at the experience of others and then discuss and decide what of the experience might be relevant to them, might fit into their system and support their reforms. All our projects therefore started with a study mission of senior officials. During these study missions the Chinese often also

³ Baidaihe was a summer resort on the coast of the East China Sea, where Chinese leaders spent part of the summer, and where a hotel provided accommodation for diplomats and foreign experts in order to spend some time during the hottest part of the summer in this seaside resort.

identified foreign experts whom they wanted to invite for short-term consultancies. At the same time they visited and assessed institutions where they wanted to send junior Chinese officials for their studies. The first generation of national project directors was often scientists and professionals who had suffered during the Cultural Revolution and who were now back in positions of command. Many of these men and women were in their seventies and some even in their eighties. They all had studied before and during the Second World War in the US, France, UK and Germany and had returned to China full of enthusiasm after 1949. Some went to the Soviet Union during the 1950s to study the Soviet experience, and all spoke fluently English, French or German and those who had been trained or studied in the Soviet Union spoke Russian. They all had been at prestigious universities and had excelled in their studies. Many had suffered severely during the Cultural Revolution, but all were willing to let bygones be bygones and to prepare the country for a renewal that they had dreamt of when they returned to China some 30 years ago.

They were fully aware that they would be setting the stage for the generation of their grandchildren to take over, because the generation of their children had missed out in terms of academic education and professional training during the years 1966–1976. Only very few of this *lost generation* succeeded in going abroad and pursue studies with a master's degree, which in the late 1980s became the precondition for somebody in the Chinese administration to rise to the level of a division chief or higher. The retirement age for men was set at 60 years and for women at 55. Many of those who had begun their studies in 1966 were getting too old to even have the chance to advance to a senior position in the government. Hence, the term *lost generation*.

We were aware that many of those receiving a one year UNDP fellowship were using it as a starting point for a longer stay abroad. They were confident that once our funding would run out, they would succeed in securing follow-up funding in order to complete their studies with a master's degree. Many universities, especially in the US, were eager to retain students from China. They offered them fellowships as soon as they had learned enough English to be able to follow the courses being taught. In some ways these students forced the government's hand or at least anticipated a government decision. In the mid-

1980s it was announced that in future a master's degree would be the entry requirement for a civil service career. The old tradition of a solid academic education as a stepping stone for advancement in a public service career had thus been fully restored.

Many of those who were not successful in "grabbing" a fellowship, transferred to state owned enterprises, where the requirements for academic qualifications were not as demanding at least until the late 1990s. Of these officials, those who had an entrepreneurial streak found their niche. But many only got into the state owned enterprises because of their connections. Over time, these managers became a heavy burden and legacy for the enterprises, as they could not be laid off, yet had to be replaced by more competent and better qualified managers.

The challenges for human resource development in China after 1978 were unprecedented and in some ways remain so today. Throughout the 1990s, more than 100,000 Chinese studied abroad every year, because the Chinese universities did not open fast enough to absorb the additional students. Reforms, which opened the Chinese universities and allowed studies for greater numbers and for students who already worked, only took place after 2000. In the meantime, technical assistance programs funded by multilateral and bilateral organizations could alleviate the pressure, but they clearly could not solve the problem.

The Four Modernizations UNDP's framework

The UNDP program was chosen by the Chinese authorities to provide assistance under the government's *Four Modernizations* policy and plan, especially in the field of the modernization of science and technology. Many party officials understood this policy as a directive to purchase advanced equipment abroad, preferably in pairs, in order to study its features and eventually produce similar equipment in China. In each and every project formulation process we were confronted with this attitude. As a result, each project retained for UNDP funding support started with tedious and sometimes acrimonious negotiations until we would reach some kind of an agreement that modernization was more than buying advanced equipment abroad. We became quite skillful at convincing our Chinese partners that modernization was a package of different procedures, working practices

and equipment supporting *new ways of doing business*. Some of the scientists and professionals who had studied in the West before 1949 knew this. The younger generation, however, was bewildered and hesitant to accept the full package, because they could not fathom the extent of changes this might bring to the Chinese way of doing things. The legacy of organizing work and work processes in the Chinese way was still all pervasive.

In the UNDP team in China, I was the only assistant resident representative for programs. I carried a huge load of these negotiations and I monitored some 70 projects. Covering a wide range of subjects, I was permanently on a steep learning curve. Not only did I have to adjust to life in China, learn about its history and current situation, I also had to become sufficiently familiar with technical matters in order to be a reasonably accepted partner in such project negotiations. My newly acquired knowledge extended from earthquake monitoring and early warning systems to improving the technological infrastructure in animal slaughtering houses. I had to become reasonably familiar with the demands of strengthening the research and teaching capacity at 10 key universities throughout China, and of introducing the best teaching methods for learning English as a second language.

Broccoli – a new vegetable for the Chinese

My all time favorite project was the strengthening of research capacity at the Beijing Vegetable Research Center. This center, which at the time was in the Western outskirts of Beijing along the canal which led to the Summer Palace, was undertaking research into the varieties of Chinese cabbage, of which there are close to 100 different varieties. As this cabbage was the primary source of vitamins and minerals from a vegetable source for the population in Central and Northern China throughout the winter months, i.e. November through March, the scientists at this center were interested in enhancing the nutritious value of the Chinese cabbage. In the international scientific literature they had found references to the relevant properties of cauliflower. Substantial research in this regard was going on at the University of Reading in England and the Chinese requested to invite one of the scientists from there to come and advise them. UNDP as the funding organization and FAO as the technical organization agreed and the

young professor came. However, after he had listened to what the Chinese scientists were interested in, he suggested that broccoli was much more suitable for their purposes. The Chinese asked “Broccoli, what is that?” The visiting professor promised them to send them broccoli seeds upon his return to England. Which he did, and the center began to plant broccoli. After they were satisfied that indeed the dietary value of broccoli was much higher than the most common varieties of Chinese cabbage, they began promoting the planting of broccoli among the farmers, first in the vicinity of their center, but soon also through a national network of agricultural research centers in all of China. Every few weeks a truck from the center would come to the UNDP office and unload several crates of fresh broccoli. I as the UNDP project officer in charge had the unenviable task to distribute this unknown vegetable among my colleagues, who somewhat skeptically accepted this gift. Today it is difficult to believe that no Chinese knew at the time broccoli and that only 20 years later there would be no Chinese meal served without at least one dish containing broccoli.

When I returned to China in 1998 for my second assignment in Beijing, I used to tell this story of how broccoli had been introduced in China many times and often to a disbelieving audience. And yet, the list of similar spectacular results is endless. Let me just tell one more: among the first set of projects was one giving a small financial contribution to the Chinese Academy of Tropical Agriculture on Hainan Island in Southern China for the planting of rubber trees. Initially, we questioned the value and justification of this request, but we and in particular our colleagues in FAO were convincingly made to understand that throughout South-western China, rubber trees could easily be planted and that there was a growing demand for natural latex globally and in China. The academy was interested in promoting crops which would be used industrially and thus secure a steady demand as well as a steady source of income for the farmers.

We remained hesitant, but eventually our colleagues from FAO persuaded us that the preparations for this project were so excellent that it was unjustified not to grant our support. We therefore agreed to give half of the financial resources that the academy had asked for, funding one or two study groups, a few short-term fellowships and one or two items of laboratory equipment.

Shortly after my return to China in 1998, one of my first duty trips took me to Hainan Island, by then a separate province from Guangdong. I decided to pay a visit to the academy to learn what had happened to our project. The dean of the academy was delighted to receive me. He had been the national project director of our project and was well placed to tell me all about the follow-up to our joint undertaking, even though it had been modest in scale (and importance in our view). Over lunch he told us that by 1998, China had moved from being a country without any rubber trees to becoming number 4 in terms of rubber tree cultivation and number 5 in production of natural latex worldwide! The academy was still in touch with a research facility in Malaysia, a contact which our project had helped to establish. They were jointly running one of the largest gen plasma banks of rubber tree varieties in the world! Such results truly left me speechless, and they were testimony to what I said earlier: China was the dream country of any development professional! Not only were projects successful in their own right (meaning everything was done to achieve the intended results), they actually were part of a larger success and process of change, leveraging these international inputs to ensure that the larger national objectives of the four modernizations were achieved, too.

Catalyzing change

In the early 1980s, we considered ourselves agents of change, who opened doors and windows for the Chinese to the world and for the world to China. And there were many doors and windows to open to let new ideas and ways of doing things flow into China, and new understanding of China and its history flow to the outside world.

That we developed in less than two years a viable program of technical cooperation - in a country as large as China—was close to a miracle. When the Chinese government approached UNDP for technical assistance, they made clear that they did not want to have resources withdrawn from the allocations for other developing countries. That, in some ways, was equal to squaring a circle. Because all criteria in place for the determination of a country allocation meant that China would be “entitled” to the largest country allocation (ahead of Bangladesh) with a volume which would necessitate raising additional resources

globally. China did not want this, and UNDP management therefore decided to give an allocation of US \$ 25 million for the first two years (1979–1981) from its reserve funds. A new five-year programming cycle was to begin globally in 1982 as well as another Five Year Plan in China. Therefore, it made a lot of sense to await the determination of China's priorities under the next Five Year Plan (1982–86) as well as the evolution of UNDP's funding situation, before fixing China's indicative planning figure (IPF), which was used in all other program countries.

Then in late 1979/early 1980, the challenge was how to allocate these extremely scarce resources over a country as huge as China. Scarce as these resources were, they still needed to produce a tangible and identifiable result and not merely represent a small injection of foreign exchange, which was a financial source in great demand by many Chinese ministries, institutes and organizations. In order to arrive at a rationale for the funding allocation, the Chinese government through the National Planning Commission decided that all UNDP assistance was to go to national programs and projects retained under the fourth component of the Four Modernizations Policy dealing with science and technology. This became the first filter. Secondly, UNDP and the Chinese government agreed that the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (MOFTEC) would serve as the central national coordinating authority. Thus all Chinese partner institutions wanting to apply for UNDP assistance had to channel their request through the Sixth Department of this ministry.

The director of the department was a former officer of the Red Army who had participated in the Long March. Since he was nearing retirement, he had no personal ambitions other than to foster and promote young cadres. In fact his department became one of the “youngest” in the ministry, not only in terms of its existence, but also in terms of the number of young and bright cadres being recruited or transferred to it. One of the requirements for the young officials wanting to work there was that they should speak and write English. This was a rare qualification at the time, unless somebody had studied English as a foreign language or attended the Diplomatic Training College of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, the UNDP office in Beijing was to have 3 or 4 national program officers who were assigned by

the Ministry to work with us. But it was so difficult to find qualified candidates that during my three years in China we never had a full contingent of officers, neither in the department in MOFTEC nor in the UNDP office. Furthermore, at the time, the Chinese administration did not separate professional work from semi-professional tasks. A young person entering the national civil service would do everything, including all secretarial functions. In the office, we expected to retain our “Western model”, which led to endless complications. Besides, and interestingly enough, the English-speaking officers assigned to the office were both men and women. However, the men would fill the professional posts while the women were assigned to the secretarial positions, the reason being that they spoke better English and were typing faster! The understandable end result was that we had an incredibly high turnover of secretaries, while the men were holding on to their jobs. To this very day, it makes me angry that we in UNDP were not able to stop or reverse this trend. We eventually succeeded in promoting one of the earliest female colleagues to a professional position, but it took close to ten years to do so.

Less by design than by coincidence, the age profile in the UNDP office was fairly similar to the one in the Sixth Department. Our resident representative was nearing retirement, while the rest of us were all in our early 30s, and many of us were single, both among the international staff and the national staff, although there were several who were recently married. The government more or less obliged anyone above the age of 28 to find a partner in marriage and would even get actively involved in finding the right match for their unmarried staff. Two of my unmarried male colleagues fell in love with Chinese women. For them to obtain the marriage permit was a lesson of how stubborn the Chinese bureaucracy could be, if they were displeased with an unusual demand. First, the two women needed a permit from their employer and school respectively. Then, our counterpart ministry had to vouch for the two young men. After these authorities had agreed, the paper work had to be completed. The Chinese made it as difficult as they possibly could by asking for originals and did not accept notarized copies. But eventually both couples were allowed to marry and stay in China until the end of the assignment of my two colleagues.

This personnel situation in both the UNDP office and the Sixth De-

partment became the source of a great camaraderie not only between the international and national staff in the UNDP office, but also between us and the young people in the Sixth Department. Several of those who had started with us in those days later moved up the national career ladder quite rapidly, or joined UN organizations including the local office. I found several in senior positions in the government and about 12 staff from the early days still working in the Beijing UNDP office, when I returned to China in 1998.

In one instance, our resident representative wanted to build on this camaraderie obliging us to work on Saturday mornings. Our national colleagues had to attend political study sessions on Saturdays. He therefore argued that it would only be fair if we came and worked, too. As he had the authority to decide on the working hours, we could not openly object. But we felt it would be fairer if our national colleagues would be freed of the obligation to attend the study sessions rather than we being obliged to work. Obviously, we could do little to obtain the dispensation for our Chinese colleagues from their study sessions, but we could try to convince Nessim Shallon that we needed those days to attend to our personal matters. Therefore, after a few weeks, we reverted back to the usual system that one of us would be on duty and inform the resident representative if something urgent had come up. We helped our Chinese colleagues to avoid their study sessions by scheduling duty trips which included as many weekends as possible.

Selection and design of projects

But back to the programming of UNDP assisted projects. In a first round, the Sixth Department had contacted departments and ministries within the ambit of MOFTEC. However, UNDP was interested in spreading its wings and not only work in the field of international trade and economic cooperation, as important as this field was. Therefore, the Sixth Department also wrote to other ministries and received in response some 500 applications. Our colleagues in MOFTEC were not amused by this result. The flood of requests required sifting through and selecting about 50 for further discussions. Departments whose applications had been declined did not take “no” readily for an answer. The resulting pressure had to be managed jointly in order to focus our attention and energy on those which we had accepted.

Faced with this dilemma, a strong professional bond was established between the Sixth Department and us. While we maintained and respected the Chinese authority to select through negotiations and training sessions, we helped to develop criteria which would allow the Director of the Sixth Department and his staff to make a rational choice. This was a period of incredible collective learning. We shared with the Chinese side our way of doing business, and they opened our eyes and ears to the Chinese way of doing things. The end result was a program which took UNDP into technical areas where it had hardly ever worked, and it took the Chinese out of their horse-trading mode, which normally was going on, when resources were allocated. Furthermore, it changed the Chinese system in a fundamental way. In the national planning system, departments were invited to submit their funding requests through their planning departments to the state planning authorities. Doing so always meant to inflate the requirements in order to make a project look important, and to secure sufficient funds to deal with any unforeseen complications. Once a project had received a national allocation, the project applicants were left to their own devices by the planning authority for the next four or five years. Implementation was left to the department which had received the funds. Nobody monitored the implementation until the planned outcomes had been achieved, which on the other hand was the requirement to obtain funding during the succeeding planning period. Departments were very reluctant to cooperate with other departments. In their view such cooperation limited their control over the implementation of a project and would require sharing the responsibility for the results good or bad. This system led to unbelievable redundancies and overlaps, but it also resulted in full employment. Departments were recruiting staff when they needed them, irrespective whether the tasks at hand truly added up to a full-time position. But the system also fostered ingenuity rarely found in a public service elsewhere.

By contrast, a UNDP project budget was drawn up with pro forma costs, job descriptions, travel and training plans and equipment specifications as well as work plans with timeframes and milestone events, which would allow monitoring during the implementation phase. Invariably, we cut a proposed budget by a huge portion without reducing the planned inputs during our project design phase. Invariably, the requesting department then wanted to add equipment items in

order to program for the full amount. But the Sixth Department only let this happen a few times. After some time they left the funding volume undefined when selecting a request for further discussions with us. Instead, they asked us in UNDP to determine the funding volume based on the project design discussions. Only the Sixth Department and the UNDP staff would know initially a notional allocation.

We accepted this role of the bad cop in this regard; the Sixth Department accepted it with regard to some other aspects. For instance, our biggest challenge was to convince Chinese project management teams to accept that some funds should be used for technical advice by foreign experts. Chinese professionals did not believe that they needed such advice. They thought what they needed was modern equipment that they would learn to operate by themselves and possibly to copy it. Preferably they wanted two pieces, one to operate and the other one to experiment with. The notion of intellectual property protection through licenses and trademarks was generally unknown in China. And yet, in one or two cases we acquiesced because we had assessed during the project design phase that the technological knowledge was sufficient to allow for only training and equipment. But even in these cases our basic assumption that technical knowhow and expertise was required proved correct. The equipment was used way below its capacity, because the workflow in Chinese labs and institutes were not geared towards the same efficiency models of Western labs in which these equipment items had been developed.

One of the most hilarious examples was a project of computerizing the Chinese Academy of Traditional Medicine. With great difficulties, we had obtained the permission of COCOM⁴ to import PDP eleven computers for this academy.⁵ Western countries that were members of COCOM were very concerned that the Chinese could misuse such computers for military purposes or use them to jumpstart the modernization of the Chinese computing industry. However, the Academy of Traditional Medicine seemed to be far enough removed from such possible deviations and the export license had been granted.

⁴ COCOM was an international Commission under US leadership which reviewed technology exports to countries of the communist bloc.

⁵ These computers were the stepping stone away from mainframe systems to what later became PCs. PDP eleven machines were at the time frontline technology in this regard.

During my first monitoring visit I was excited to learn about the combination or even competition between the Chinese way of recording medicinal plants and their medical value and use and a Western, computerized way of doing this. At our arrival we saw the computers well-established in a dust-free environment, and we had to don white gowns and exchange our shoes against special slippers. Then I asked what they were using the computers for. In response I was told they were used to compute the payroll. Nonplussed I asked why, because I knew that a Chinese payroll at the time was a pretty straightforward affair since everybody received more or less the same salary. The Chinese answered that the computers had come with the payroll installed and they did not want to waste this feature.

I am certain the computers later on were also used for other epidemiological or scientific purposes. But the initial combination of Chinese and Western ways of computing data was rather trivial.

Relevance of our program beyond UNDP and China

Overall, our Chinese counterparts in the ministry and we in the UNDP office worked as one team. Through our daily work, we fostered a change in the management of public funds and an understanding of alternative ways of carrying out scientific research and technological development. This was almost an unintended result of our close cooperation, but possibly the one with the highest impact on the *opening up policy* of China. In return, our Chinese counterparts taught us new ways of appraising technical assistance requirements and forced us to develop a new, computerized monitoring system for the UNDP program. Eventually, the specifications of this system became the core of a computerized program management system which was deployed globally by UNDP to all its country offices.

When UNDP opened its office in Beijing it was the first multilateral organization to do so, but other UN organizations and international development agencies followed very soon. Still for many years, we were a large fish in a small pond of aid agencies. Our help and advice was much sought after by a variety of foreign organizations coming into China. Although UNDP's donors were at the time in general not very positively inclined towards local offices extending their services to other development agencies, in the case of China there was no way we

could do otherwise.⁶ We helped UN organizations with the logistics, we helped the World Bank with our grant funds to start their lending program and we advised bilateral agencies, such as AUSAid, on what according to our experience worked in the Chinese context.

The Canadian aid agency CIDA flew me at their cost to Ottawa and gave me the test that they used to assess all their applicants. They took my answers as benchmarks for assessing the capacity of a success-promising candidate.⁷

In the early 1980s, many business representatives also came to us to pick our brains. I always cherished these contacts, because business representatives were a captive audience and they were more inclined to listen as they and we did not operate on the same turf. Our basic counsel to foreign businesses was that they should not be lured by the vastness of the Chinese market. China would never allow free access to these markets unless foreign companies sought a partnership with a Chinese company. Many did not like this message, but those who did and followed the course of investing in China and Chinese companies did so against enormous bureaucratic obstacles, but nevertheless rarely without commercial success in the long run.

By the time, our program matured and we became more familiar with the Chinese situation. We had earned our trust with our Chinese counterparts, and as a result we became more daring in making our own enquiries about needs and requirements for international cooperation. In particular, we wanted to move beyond Beijing, Shanghai and the other major urban centers of China, where most of our projects were located.

Going into Tibet

In 1980, working in Tibet was an absolute no-no for foreigners. The Chinese government was not comfortable with foreigners travelling

⁶ This global situation changed dramatically over the years and UNDP was entrusted with a proactive local coordination role, and UNDP resident representatives who also served as UN coordinators were assessed for their ability to coordinate a team and eventually their performance was evaluated on that basis.

⁷ My performance as UN resident coordinator during my second stint in China served again as such a yardstick for defining generically the functions and duties of a resident coordinator by the International Civil Service Commission. China truly brought out in us our best professional qualities which gave inspiration to others in similar positions.

there and foreign development agencies were uncomfortable suggesting programs fearing to be drawn into a quagmire of political and cultural controversy. Not so UNDP. We were concerned that if China was moving fast to modernize its economy and its scientific and educational facilities, Tibet could and should not be left behind. In late 1981, we informally began to enquire with our central coordinating authority in Beijing, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Cooperation, whether there were no requests from Tibet for UNDP assistance. They responded yes, there were, but they were ill prepared and they could not convince the authorities in Lhasa to change and improve them. Hence, there were none coming through to us.

We reiterated our interest, and eventually a request came. The authorities in Lhasa wanted technical assistance for the exploration and exploitation of geothermal energy sources for generating electricity to be used in Lhasa. We forwarded the request for technical assessment to our colleagues in UNDTCD⁸ in New York, who told us that not only was the proposal sufficiently solid enough to be taken up, but that in addition they had grants available from the Italian government for such technical assistance. Italy was interested in internationally promoting its experience and equipment for the exploration and exploitation of geothermal energy sources. We were interested in accessing as broad a spectrum of technical expertise as possible, using our funds for the recruitment of experts from New Zealand and Iceland, two other countries with considerable experience in this field. The project thus was approved with a mix of UNDP and Italian funding in record time, and for once we started with experts coming to China and Tibet rather than with a study tour. Yet, after these foreign experts had gone to Tibet, they came back unsure whether the locally drawn up plans could work. They believed that the temperature of the geothermal water was too low and the well too deep. They estimated that when the water would reach the surface it would not be hot enough for generating electricity. However, they admitted that none had had experience to work at such an altitude (the exploration site was at 4,000 m) and therefore could not determine whether the altitude might sufficiently compensate for the lower than usual temperature of the water.

8 The Department of Technical Cooperation for Development in the UN secretariat.

We were at a loss what to do next. The experts left the Chinese government and us in a situation of uncertainty. Eventually, we agreed to let the Chinese experts go on a study mission and to wait what they would advise to do upon their return. Among other countries they also visited Japan, and from there they returned with a solution which appeared workable. But Japan was not willing to offer equipment and certainly not for free. Should we still take up the Italian offer? The Chinese side assured us that if they were allowed to alter the specifications of the equipment, then they would be able to use the Italian pipes, tubes and turbines. Protracted negotiations ensued, and when I left China in early 1983, a solution had not yet been found.

I then lost sight of the project, but again, when in May 1999 I traveled to Tibet, I asked for a visit to this project site. And what did I see: a power generating plant which supplied electricity to Lhasa meeting 40 percent of the city's electricity needs, and a second site where the use of hotter water in a deeper well was being explored. Furthermore, the water running off the turbines was still at a temperature of 40 degrees centigrade. Therefore, the power plant had built an Olympic size swimming pool next to the plant, cooling the water down to 32 centigrade allowing for people to swim outdoors even in the deepest winter. Although we were there in late spring, it was still a breath-taking experience for several reasons: to swim at 4,000 m, in water that had the temperature of a bathtub and was surrounded by snow capped mountains rising to 7,000 m.

The Vice-Governor of Tibet, who hosted a dinner for me during this trip, told us what had happened. He had been at the time the national project director, and was thus familiar with the development of the power plant. In a nutshell what happened was that the Italian equipment was imported and installed without any changes. It did not work satisfactorily, but it gave the site engineers the opportunity to draw up detailed specifications for equipment, which was then bought to order in Japan with Chinese funding. The UN project was not a success directly. But it is a testimony to the indomitable spirit of Chinese experts to make things work even against great odds. A later team of UNDP officers and other Chinese and Tibetan engineers and officials tried to emulate this project in Naqu in Northern Tibet. But there it never got to work over many years. I had the unpleasant task

“to pull the plug” on the UNDP contribution. Regrettably there were no signs that the local engineers would eventually find a workable solution. We advised the local authorities to explore the possibilities of wind energy instead, as the valley of Naqu had strong winds all year round.

Traveling in China

One of the best ways to gain a glimpse of Chinese daily life was to travel. I was unencumbered by a family and loved to travel. Consequently, I was entrusted with most of the project site visits outside Beijing. Each time an officer of the ministry and a national officer from the UNDP office accompanied me during such travels. Diplomats considered these travel companions watchdogs controlling the foreigner’s movements. I quite liked their company and the opportunity to chat with them. Surely there was an element of control, but mostly our Chinese colleagues were there to protect us from the many daily inconveniences of the Chinese way of life.

As disciplined Chinese are in family or office settings, as unruly they can be in a public place. To board a bus or a train among Chinese without special treatment can be quite rough, as queuing and helping others was unknown. Once as I was driving home in my personal car from the office I saw a fairly big Chinese crowd pushing two African kids across the street. I stopped and asked the kids to get into my car. When we drove off, the Chinese crowds surrounded my car and hammered with their fists on the roof of my small Toyota *Starlet*, but let us go. I asked the kids, a boy and a smaller girl, what had happened and they said that they had wanted to take the bus home, but the Chinese were shoving and pushing so much that the boy had opened his arms to protect his younger sister. This gesture by the boy infuriated the Chinese so much that they pulled the kids off the bus and were pushing them away from it. I am not sure what would have happened, had I not intervened. At the very minimum the two kids would have had to walk home to the diplomatic compound some 4 km away, where they lived (they were the children of a diplomat assigned to one of the African embassies in Beijing).

In the early 1980s, many Chinese were regrettably terribly racist, but even this changed for the better in a few years, at least outwardly. By

then, African countries were sending much fewer students to China. On the other hand, UN organizations were assigning African colleagues to their offices in Beijing. I requested a Malawian colleague, Macleod Nyirongo, to serve as my deputy in 2000. I left no doubt that I expected everyone to fully respect Macleod in his role and function. In private, Macleod was telling me how he was always amused to see our Chinese colleagues strenuously trying to conceal their constant awareness of his black skin and African background.

Overall, Chinese curiosity about the outside world and willingness to learn English as the first foreign language was overtaking their intended or ordered distance to foreigners very rapidly. No walk in a public park would be possible without at least several times being approached by Chinese trying to practice their English on us. The standard questions were: where did we come from, how old were we, where did we work, and how much did we earn. While these were questions that no Chinese would ask another Chinese, they were regarded as permissible when it came to foreigners. Curiosity and learning was not driven by the desire to better understand and respect foreign cultures, but to learn and master them so as to be able to communicate with foreigners and to assert Chinese equal or even superior standing in the world.

Outside Beijing or Shanghai, such curiosity could be quite overwhelming. People would close in on a foreigner in great numbers and watch intently what he or she was doing. Kids would come up and touch the clothes we were wearing. Quickly ruled in by the adults, these kids were only doing what the adults would have loved to do. Of greatest interest were always our shoes. In the early 1980s, most Chinese were still wearing cloth shoes; only high-ranking cadres wore leather shoes. Yet, foreigners invariably were wearing leather shoes. I can just imagine the discussions and jokes Chinese would make about the puzzle whether this meant that all foreigners were high ranking officials.

But even in Shanghai or Beijing it was impossible to keep one's eyes at eye level in a crowd, as this meant one would have constant eye contact with people walking in the other direction. We therefore developed a habit of always looking above the heads of the oncoming people in order to avoid intense stares.

Foreigners were an exotic breed in China at the time. They were re-

garded as such sometimes with admiration, sometimes with a slight degree of animosity and even hostility, but always with an overbearing amount of curiosity. I therefore learned to appreciate greatly the “protection” by my Chinese hosts, and more than once I was glad to be able to escape into the privacy of a car or a hotel room. After some time, of course, even we became weary of the constant chaperons, and especially in places where we knew our way around, we would plead with them, to let us go on our own. We promised that we would not do anything which might excite the Chinese. I recall having asked for such a moment of respite from constant company in Hangzhou, because I wanted to return to the tomb of a general of ancient times, who had been betrayed by one of his officers and his family. Statues of both the betraying officer and his wife were placed at the entrance to the tomb and people to this very day were spitting on the statues. I found this a remarkable sense of historical continuity. As I was standing there watching people, an elderly man walked up to me and asked in perfect English whether I understood the meaning of the spitting. I replied not quite honestly that I didn't, and he told me the story again. Interestingly enough that at this occasion people stood in a respectful circle around us and did not bother me or this kind Chinese gentleman who turned out to be a professor of English at one of the Hangzhou institutes of higher learning.

Visiting Xinjiang

Out West it was in fact the easiest for foreigners to travel. In these multi-ethnic places, people were used to seeing all kinds of different people and minded their own business, assuming that I was there for a good reason and with the necessary permission. At the same time, it gave me a glimpse of the cultural insensitivity which many Chinese practiced openly. In the summer of 1982, I was travelling on my own during a short vacation to Xinjiang. I flew from Beijing to Urumtschi traveling back by train with several stops along the way. I was very eager to go as far West as Kashgar, but at the time there were riots over raised prices for bread, and consequently Kashgar was closed to foreigners. On my way back I stopped in Turfan, Dunhuang and Xian. I even hitched an empty tourist bus from Dunhuang to my next destination Jiuquan together with a few Hong Kong Chinese. That clearly was without any permission, but nobody bothered and the driver was probably glad to

have a few passengers during the ride through the Gobi desert, and we were glad not to have to return to the train station, which was 120 km from Dunhuang Township in a different direction.

When I arrived in Urumtschi I was to meet the China Travel Services at the airport. I had booked a car and a driver and an English-speaking guide. This proved helpful to get around easily but also a nuisance, as I had to respect their working style with mid-day breaks at 12 noon sharp and end of service at 5 p.m. sharp. Both also wanted the weekend off. I agreed to Sunday off, but resisted Saturday afternoon. In exchange for services on Saturday the guide asked me to pay for a meal and a bath at the hotel for her. The driver, too, stayed at my expense at the hotel for the night. They argued that I would have to pay the Travel Services more if he went home and came back the next day.

On the other hand, they willingly arranged for a picnic lunch when we went up to the Tianshan range and Tianqi Lake, and were quite helpful and willing to let me wander around the markets and department stores in Urumtschi on my own. It was striking how much the Chinese and Uyghurs lived in a fragile truce with each other. In a street outside a Chinese market I watched a drunken young Uyghur accidentally falling against a Han Chinese's bicycle. As the owner of the bike was about to give him a beating, the boy fell to the ground and pretended not to know what was happening. A crowd gathered around the scene, in order to watch what was going to happen next. I was not sure how this would turn out and I left, as I did not want to get caught in an incidence which might turn ugly.⁹ Violence seemed to be just below the surface.

The next stop on my way back to the East was Turfan. There, too, I had booked a car, driver and guide, who awaited me as I got off the

⁹ When I came back to Urumtschi some 20 years later, the situation had at least outwardly changed very much for the better. It had become a truly bilingual city, where many Chinese civil servants spoke Uyghur as much as some of the urban Uyghurs spoke Chinese. The markets still had different sections, but they were under the same roof and were frequented by both Chinese and Uyghur customers for their respective specialties. At the same time, the cultural divide had deepened and clashes moved to another plane. For instance, the Uyghur elders did no longer approve of marriages between Uyghur women and Chinese men. And stronger religious influences were noticeable in daily life, such as more Uyghur women being veiled in the rural areas. While the Chinese were learning fast and had become more respectful, the Uyghur resistance to integration with Han Chinese culture had stiffened.

train. Driving towards the oasis of Turfan from the train station, one follows an old road, that already Sir Aurel Stein described in his book about his travels in East Turkmenistan in the late 19th century. It was amazing to cross the remnants of the Great Wall, as he did some 90 years earlier and to read his depiction of the Chinese, whom he attests a “physical aversion from taking risks”. Well, he needed kulis to carry his exploratory equipment to the various Buddhist sites in remote desert locations. Such travel can hardly have been attractive to either the Han Chinese of the time or the Muslim Uyghurs. Today the Chinese tourist industry is very willing to take anyone who wants to go for good money to these caves, pagodas and mosques.

Everywhere I went, the Uyghurs were open and hospitable. One woman even said as she gave me freshly baked bread, that I looked like one of them. This was a noticeable difference to the way Chinese treated a foreigner. Chinese always conveyed the impression of regarding us as exotic creatures. While it was extremely easy to strike up a casual conversation with the Uyghurs who invariably would offer me spontaneously fruits, bread and water, and would make lighthearted remarks about my clothes and my way to behave, conversations with Chinese always had an element of guarded curiosity and their hospitality was marked by the perceived importance of my position. My Chinese guide got often irritated by these spontaneous interactions, whose origins she could not understand. When I became too friendly with my chance local acquaintances, my Chinese guide would point out that Muslims had destroyed many Buddhist sites. I ignored the remark, as I had no interest in being drawn into a conversation about the merits or demerits of the Muslim population of Western China. I also did not comment on her question, whether I was a believer, when I took off my shoes to enter a mosque. I just explained to her that I did so out of respect of the Muslim customs.

One visit in particular I remember vividly to this very day. Late in the afternoon, the driver took me to a ruined site some 5-6 km outside the oasis of Turfan, the guide had excused herself. It was still sizzling hot, but the sun was going down and the shadows got longer. Anywhere in the world the light is most beautiful during these early moments of a sunset. The ruins of Jiaohe are on a cliff overlooking a fertile valley, where fields are irrigated from a nearby artificial lake. Farmers were

leaving the fields and heading home. On the dirt road we overtook a farmer sitting on his horse drawn cart smoking a pipe. When I stood among the ruined tombs looking down, the farmer had driven on at least 1 km. By then, he was singing a Uyghur tune and his voice carried up to where I stood. The moment was sheer bliss: the heat, the wind whistling through the ruins, and the song of this Uyghur farmer, drifting across the valley. There was no other noise and no other worry to disturb the peacefulness of that moment!

Encounter with the Tibetan culture

On the same trip I also had my first direct encounter with the Tibetan culture. UNDP supported a project in Xining, the capital of Qinghai province. Because I was out West, the office in Beijing had decided that I should visit this project. However, before I left Beijing the permit had not come through. When I arrived in Lanzhou, it had still not come through. In fact, it had been refused twice, which was unusual. But what used to be true in imperial times was true then, too. Beijing was far and the sky was high, and so my Chinese hosts in Lanzhou somehow arranged for a permit locally. I boarded the train and went off to Xining. When we pulled into the train station in Xining, I immediately understood why the Beijing authorities had refused my permit. The Panchen Lama¹⁰ was travelling on the same train, paying an official visit to Xining and surrounding monasteries during the very days that I was to be there. Of course, his and my paths never crossed, although I visited some of the same places and saw the city teeming with visiting Tibetans from other parts of Qinghai province and Tibet. It is interesting what I wrote about my first impressions about Tibet and Tibetans in my diary. After the visit to the Tar Si monastery, one of the very important Tibetan monasteries which had been decked out in full for the visit of the Panchen Lama, I wrote: “The poverty, squalor and backwardness of Tibetan peasants are very appalling. Lamaism and its exploitation of the peasantry is so overpowering that it is difficult to appreciate the spiritual values and enjoy the artistic Tibetan

10 The Panchen Lama is head of one of the Tibetan religious schools and as such as important to Tibetans as the Dalai Lama. However, as the Dalai Lama also had been entrusted prior to 1949 with running the Tibetan government he is higher ranking. The Panchen Lama stayed in Tibet and travelled to provinces like Qinghai, where a large number of Tibetans live.

expressions.” I have to admit that when I travelled years later to Tibet, I was faced with similar ambivalent feelings and thoughts.¹¹

Xian – the ancient Chinese capital

At my next stop, Xian, I reverted back to my status as a full-time tourist. I had an excellent and detailed guidebook and so I decided I only needed a car and driver and no human guide. Maybe this was a bad decision. At the time drivers were very privileged and powerful in China. They did not necessarily drive where one as the paying guest wanted to go, but decided on the route and timing of visits at their convenience. Any perceived detour was at an extra cost, if it was possible at all. Nevertheless, I successfully negotiated with my driver to take me to some of the Han dynasty tombs, which were rarely visited by tourists and in fact became later inaccessible, except for some samples in the Shaanxi museum. Of course, the driver, as so many other tourist guides before him, asked me why I was interested in visiting these places. In some cases he pretended or maybe truly did not know the way to find them. Fortunately, I had maps to prod him along. The years of the Cultural Revolution had not destroyed the sites, but it had destroyed any appreciation of the artistic expressions of Chinese history and culture among the Chinese. Sometimes it was funny, but mostly it was sad, that we foreign tourists would have to share with our Chinese companions what we learned from our guidebooks—which was as new to them as it was to us.

Interacting with Chinese friends and people at work

Back in Beijing, I reentered my usual active social life. Robert Tellier, the husband of my colleague and neighbor Siri Melchior, worked in the Chinese Foreign Languages Press as a translator/editor for their journals in French. Through him we came to know a number of other foreign experts employed by the Chinese institutions, and we also met some of their socially more daring Chinese colleagues. These in turn brought us into contact with Chinese artists, mostly painters and calligraphers, but also some actors and singers. These Chinese artists,

¹¹ I shall return to this later in chapter 6.

while not really dissidents¹², were challenging constantly the controls of the political system and the limits of its tolerance. Zhang Zhi Mei, a female Chinese translator, who spoke and wrote flawless English, became a close friend of several of us. In the 1950s, she had been assigned to the Chinese embassy in East Berlin, and this established a special bond between us. She came from a well-educated Beijing family. Her father had studied in Japan in the early 1940s, and upon his return he had risen rapidly in a Beijing bank to a senior management position. But after October 1949 his employment was terminated, since the family had the “wrong class background”. Her father remained unemployed for the rest of his life, while her mother somehow made ends meet for the whole family. Her only brother managed to study engineering, and Zhi Mei succeeded through her knowledge of foreign languages in getting into posts, which kept her in touch with the outside world. Both her mother and Zhi Mei were remarkable women. Their zest and resourcefulness were awe-inspiring. Yet, outwardly they looked to an unknowing onlooker as two typically friendly Chinese ladies, her mother still with bound feet.¹³

Zhi Mei became a guide for our explorations into China’s antiquities around Beijing, as much as we became a guide to her to these sites with our well-informed foreign tourist guidebooks.¹⁴ Although many of these sites lay in ruins, partly through decades of neglect, partly through the vandalism of the young red guards during the Cultural Revolution, Zhi Mei quite willingly accompanied us on our visits to these places. She served as our interpreter when we had to ask for the way, or when the local farmers engaged us in a conversation. At the same time, she gained knowledge through our interest in the vestiges of China’s imperial history—knowledge which was lost to her and

¹² When I arrived in China, the democracy wall was still up and I drove past it every day. But while the evolution of this “alternative newspaper” was closely watched in the West through press reports by foreign correspondents, in Beijing it was just one of many signs of people’s pulling down the walls which held their individual freedom enclosed.

¹³ Zhang Zhi Mei later wrote a book about her life: “Fox spirit. A Woman in Mao’s China”, Vehicule Press, Montreal 1992, also available in German and French.

¹⁴ The most useful of them all at the time was Nagel’s *Encyclopedia-Guide China*. A group of French sinologists had traveled all over China in the late 1950s/early 1960s and written a comprehensive historical and cultural guidebook of 1,500 pages, which was unparalleled in the depth and breadth of its knowledge. The most seasoned foreign travelers would travel with their Nagel of 1964; we used the updated version of 1972, as it also documented the damages of the Cultural Revolution.

her generation. It gave our visits a special stimulus to overcome our Chinese friend's ignorance of China's history. While we were learning together the facts, we, the foreign residents, and our Chinese companions would interpret Chinese history quite differently. We also would relate to the beauty and the charm of these sites in very different ways. We would, however, find common ground through the pleasure of a picnic or a short walk around the ruins of tombs, small temples and other historical sites, but there was certain unease on the side of our Chinese companions that they would have to learn so much from foreign sources about their own history.

One of my proudest possessions was a scroll with a copy of calligraphy from the Qing dynasty. The original was in the collection of the Forbidden City and my copy was written for me by the Chief Curator of the Museum.¹⁵ It read "Nande hu tu". This was a famous quote from a 19th century poem by a writer who deplored the failing of the reform efforts.

I hung the scroll in my office and learned a lot about my Chinese visitors by their reaction to this scroll. First, it was startling how many of my visitors knew the poem, some admitting to it openly, others more furtively. Then it became interesting to gather a number of possible translations emphasizing different aspects of the writing. My favorite one was "It is difficult to pretend not to know". After almost three years in China and working intensively with Chinese, this saying gained a special meaning. My Chinese colleagues in the office thought it appropriate for me to have chosen that particular translation, as indeed I had learned to understand a lot about the Chinese system, but often I pretended not to know - in particular on a first encounter. At the time, the Chinese were convinced that they had to explain their system to us foreigners. Somehow they could not fathom that maybe we knew a thing or two about China. Often it was a question of courtesy to sit through the umpteenth introduction to the Chinese way of planning and organizing projects, and certainly not a question of pretense to mislead our Chinese interlocutors. During a project negotiation I

¹⁵ Such a gift was in keeping with the Chinese tradition that scholars would copy the works by great masters by hand. The value of the copy would depend on the artistic skills of the scholar. In my eyes my copy was undistinguishable from the original and it was more valuable to me than any photocopy or photo of the original would have been.

could make out who in a group was the Party Secretary, the professional or supporting staff, even without introductions. By their reactions to my suggestions I could detect who was who. The Party Secretary would to most suggestions or advice from our side say that they will take it under advisement. In this context the phrase “keyi” was most often used. Literally translated it means “maybe”. However it could mean, “we shall see what we can do”, or “perhaps this can be done”, or “forget it, never”. It very much depended whether a decision-maker, young professional or a Party Secretary used the expression.

I recall one negotiation and subsequent dinner where we were getting absolutely nowhere. We were debating what would lead most successfully to technological modernization and change, and we argued “brains” and our Chinese counterparts argued “equipment”. For whatever reason, we got undiplomatically locked into a dead-end situation, until one of our hosts said in order to defuse the mounting tension: “Well, in China our approach is most appropriate. Chinese represent one quarter of humankind, and the world could learn from China. Besides, we know best of what suits China.” To which one of my visiting colleagues from New York responded without missing a beat: “Alright, but three quarter of humankind tick differently and have realized progress which China is now willing to acquire. So, maybe, China could learn from the outside world in the way the West worked.” Fortunately, we all laughed and our conversation continued over different subjects.¹⁶

What was most rewarding was that such discussions were never the end for our Chinese partners. They would in fact analyze and debate among themselves what we had said, and eventually revise their thinking, if they concluded that this was more helpful to achieve their objectives. While they would never openly admit to us that they had taken a different view because of our interventions and arguments, they nevertheless studied us hard and learned from such exchanges more than we imagined at the time. Although the sharpness of our colleague from New York was unusual, it was taken in good humor.

¹⁶ Years later the Chinese would argue: we are a fifth of humankind and hence we have a special responsibility to the world. This shift represented a remarkable change from the more inward looking view to a truly global view of Chinese development and economic performance.

The Chinese gave us, from the UN, a greater license than they gave most other foreigners. They knew that we had no ulterior motive than for them to succeed. So they often gave us the benefit of the doubt although their way of working would not allow to openly admitting this to us.

20 years of such voracious capacity to learn in many instances reversed the table on us foreigners. We were there to learn from the Chinese about what was doable and what was not. Often, we were behind the knowledge of the young Chinese civil servants, by then with an MA and a Ph.D. from Western universities. It had become a very different challenge to work in China 20 years into the reform process. But I'll tell these stories in a later chapter.

Ready to leave China

In the autumn of 1982, I began to feel mentally tired. The constant and relentless arguments over the optimal way for the Chinese to modernize their scientific and technological development were wearing me down. Over the last two years UNDP had started a program with some 130 projects. 70 of those were overseen or monitored by me from their inception through their implementation phases. We had formulated a Five Year Program for 1982–1986, for which I had done most of the background research. We were still on a steep learning curve as were our Chinese counterparts. There had been several months when we approved one project per week, necessitating systematic communications with external and Chinese parties to each project requiring many long hours at the office.

As much as I continued to enjoy seeing and learning every day more about China and acquiring almost daily new professional skills, I also became weary of the repeated “fight” with Chinese project authorities to primarily use our funds for study tours and equipment purchases. I got also tired of the Chinese habit to request changes to an approved project design and budget as soon as the document had been signed. By then I knew what was driving such requests and I kept an open mind. Admittedly, very often the Chinese proposed real improvements to a project design as they entered the implementation phase, but at the same time such changes needed to be duly recorded and in particular changes to budget allocations needed to be approved and

signed by all those concerned. This “Western” requirement was again very alien to our Chinese partners. In “their” system work plans and budgets were estimates, to be refined and altered as a project progressed. In the national planning system the obligation of a unit to the planning authorities was to obtain with the allocated resources the agreed results within the pre-determined time frame. The rest was left to the implementing unit. In an economy where all prices were fixed, and only the fastest and smartest could get what was needed, the Chinese management style of being pragmatic, flexible and dealing with scarcities in a creative way was absolutely appropriate.

At the same time, we could not totally give in to the Chinese working habit that only the result counted and almost any means was permissible. According to our system, we purchased goods and services on the world market, and we needed to ensure that we had value for money, requiring competitive bidding of contracts, and hiring from a pool of experts. This was totally new to our Chinese partners and to our great bemusement they considered UNDP to be bureaucratic and inflexible. The only way to convince them otherwise was to be able to show solutions to their “problems” which they had not thought of and to obtain without undue delay results that were acceptable, but also new to them. Unfortunately, we were not always on the same wavelength in our team. I had acquired the reputation to be particularly “difficult”. Yet everybody gave me a long rope. Even though both the Chinese project authorities and my colleagues in the office and in the Sixth Department often considered me a nuisance for my insistence to find “better” solutions, they also had experienced that through my holding tough, we found a more effective solution to a particular problem in almost all cases.

For me the implication of my “fighting spirit” was that the burden of proof lay on my shoulders. I therefore spent long days and many weekends in the office in order to gather the necessary information and make needed contacts. The saving grace for me was that everybody in the UN system was interested in what was happening in China, and determined to show that UN organizations could rise to the challenge of assisting China in its reform process. I never experienced the UN system before or afterwards in its operations as responsive and efficient as during those early days of China’s opening up policy. It helped that

in those early days the UN system was one of the small avenues into China. Therefore, it was easy for us to recruit even the most renowned experts in all those fields the Chinese wanted our assistance. At the time, these experts even accepted the UN fee structure which often was way below what they were charging other clients. In the process I learned a lot about the way the international consultancy market worked, and I also learned a lot about convincing “big shots” to agree to our and the Chinese terms of engagement. When I promised the Chinese that we could deliver a better service for our money, I took calculated risks. But before I had brokered an agreement between all parties, there were many days and weeks of anxious and exhausting negotiations and communications.

In October 1982, I took a short vacation and flew to Kyoto. During this week I realized that there was an interesting and very different world beyond China and that it was time for me to move on. Therefore, when I returned to Beijing I asked for a transfer, preferably to HQs. Neither my resident representative nor the regional director was happy about my decision, but they also knew that the pressure had been high and was continuing to be so. They thus supported my request.

Everybody saw me on the fast track to become one of the few female resident representatives. But my ambitions were different. I wanted to learn more about UNDP and its global outreach. China had absorbed so much of my attention and energy over the last three years that I felt I needed to learn more about the larger picture and other parts of the world. Besides, any country after China looked small, and possibly dull. And so, despite the amazement of everybody I accepted, in December 1982, the post of area officer for the Maghreb countries and Djibouti in the regional bureau for Arab States at UNDP HQs in New York.



The skyline of Manhattan from my Kitchen Window

3. Next Destination: New York – The Hub Of The World (1983 – 1987)

Almost to the day three years after I had arrived in China, I left Beijing on transfer to New York in mid-January 1983. When I arrived, all senior staff was away in Copenhagen for a global meeting of resident representatives and HQs managers. That gave me time to settle in and to get prepared for my new role and function as backstopping officer for our operations in four countries of the Arab world. It also gave me time to look for an apartment, which turned out to be more difficult than I had thought. Fortunately, I was able to stay with a friend and did not have to run up a huge hotel bill. Still my shipment of household goods was about to arrive and I had not yet signed a lease. Just in time I found an apartment to my liking, but the landlord wanted guarantees which were outrageous. Some landlords had made bad experiences with diplomats assigned to permanent missions to the UN who were not paying their rent. My explanation that I was not a diplomat, but an employee of the UN did not convince the real estate agent that I would be not a runaway tenant. They regarded anybody from the UN as an exotic breed and mistrusted our credentials. Fortunately through friends I knew a lawyer working in the law firm of former Mayor Lindsay, who sorted matters out for me. It gave me the first taste of a city which was ill at ease with the UN, although the presence of the UN brought every year business to the city which was worth billions of US Dollars.¹

Life in New York – a ball

As much as I had looked forward to coming to New York, I had major difficulties adjusting to my new professional position. On the other

¹ A few years later the American Deputy Permanent Representative publicly said that the US would not mind if the UN relocated. When the New York Times sometime in the mid-1990s published an article in their weekend magazine about New York as the world's capital, the UN was not even mentioned. It was a bittersweet experience to live as a UN staff in New York. Of course there were many New Yorkers who were fully committed to the goals of the UN and they were champions of the UN, but the official New York had at best a very ambivalent relationship to the world organization. Years later I was personally involved in negotiating with the City of New York a better deal for UNDP's HQs to remain in Manhattan, which showed yet another facet of the NYC-UN relationship I'll return to this in chapter 5.

hand, in my personal life I felt at home right away. I greatly enjoyed being in a metropolitan setting where movies, concerts, exhibitions, restaurants, parks, friends and sites outside of New York were freely and abundantly accessible, and if need be any time of the day and night. Only now did I realize the constraints on our life in China. As much as we had enjoyed many privileges, and had had enough freedom of movement not to feel boxed in, life in New York had an ease which was dazzling.

I took full advantage of what the city had to offer. Two events greatly facilitated my adjustment to live in the Big Apple. About half a year into my assignment I received a letter from German diplomatic friends, Christian and Angelika Siebeck, who were stationed in Beijing saying, guess what? We are being transferred to New York. I could not believe such a happy coincidence. To make things even better, they found a loft just South of Houston Street on Mercer Street, while I lived in a penthouse on Bleeker and Mercer Street. We thus lived just a stone throw apart, which facilitated greatly frequent contacts. When I left Berlin in 1975 for Cotonou, Angelika had moved into my apartment in Berlin. Then we had met by chance in Beijing and spent many weekends, birthdays and Christmas holidays together. Now in New York we were practically neighbors and formed a kind of extended family. Siebecks were extremely hospitable and had constantly visitors, some of whom spilled over into my apartment. Many evenings we would meet just for a beer at Fanelli's, a neighborhood bar, or we would go spontaneously and see a movie together in one of the cinemas in Greenwich Village. It made living in New York like back home in Berlin.

Siebecks' arrival became one of the ever increasing incidents which made living and travelling around the world so easy. Over the years, I assembled friends and acquaintances in so many countries that wherever I travelled I would know somebody, even in the remotest place. In the course of my career with the UN, I visited over 120 countries, and yet, because of these contacts, the world felt like a village to me.

The second event, which changed my life dramatically for the better, was even more of a happenstance. New York City is a wonderful place, but it is noisy, restless and very tiring. Therefore, anyone who can

afford it rents at least for the summer period from Memorial Day at the end of May until Labor Day at the beginning of September a place in the countryside. Many UN colleagues did the same. Of course, we UN staff could not afford the Hamptons, but people found places which were affordable and still within easy reach from the city for the weekend. So I, too, got together with a few colleagues and started to look for a summer place to rent. One Saturday in April, I saw a tiny ad in the *New York Times* advertising a cottage in the Catskills for US \$ 450 for the season. We thought, maybe it is just a shack, but what did we have to lose. The price was certainly right. Then I called the number given, which was from the Philadelphia area. When I called, a young woman answered and told me that the place was already as good as rented, but if we wanted we could take a look. We said we would and agreed we would call back after our return. Before I hung up the phone, I asked whom I was talking to, and the young woman gave a name which sounded familiar from Beijing. So I asked her whether she was in any way related to this family. She replied yes, they were her parents-in-law. I told her that I had spent many weekends with them, by which time it was pretty clear that, if we wanted the cottage, we would have it. The China connection was clearly seeing to that. To cut a long story short: we drove up to the cottage near Woodstock which was in fact the cottage of the former farmhands on the family estate, liked the place, proceeded to rent it, renovate it and spent many delightful weekends up in the Catskills mountains overlooking one of the biggest water basins of New York City, the Ashokan reservoir.

We normally left the city after the rush hour on Friday evenings, and returned late on Sundays. Regrettably, the cottage was not winterized and there was therefore no way we could keep it during the winter, but we certainly recharged our batteries there during the summer months, entertaining other friends and colleagues who had houses nearby or came up with us for the weekend. I greatly enjoyed rural New York, which in the Catskills is pretty rustic with dirt roads, forests and wild-life. I did not care too much about encountering bears or other wild animals. The raccoons overturning our garbage cans and the deer eating our flowers were quite enough for me.

Headquarters – a difficult adjustment

Work at HQs was another matter. As a P3² area officer I was pretty much at the bottom of the hierarchy. Everything I produced needed the clearance and approval of higher ranking colleagues. In a country office, one needed to react quickly and there was not always time to check with superiors on what to say or write. Frequent formal and informal consultations with colleagues and supervisors had to ensure that we followed a UNDP line while acting self-reliantly. In HQs as a junior officer it was better to listen and to wait until a task was assigned and then follow instructions. Furthermore, many of the senior staff had either never been in the field or it was a long time ago. Their views were often prejudiced against our colleagues in the country offices, and they felt they had the responsibility of keeping our colleagues in the field on the straight and narrow. I could not relate to such highhandedness very well. Being by disposition an outspoken and not a very patient person, I got myself more than once into trouble. Fortunately for me, Gualtiero Fulcheri and Siba Das, my immediate supervisors in the two successive functions I assumed in the Regional Bureau over time, understood me and they were gentle in guiding my adjustment to the ways HQs worked. They bailed me out more than once, by saying that I had discussed my actions with them. Siba in particular taught me to understand the politics at HQs and how to use the competing interests to the advantage of what we wanted to achieve rather than to fight the bureaucratic ways of others. Although both Gualtiero and Siba left for other assignments while I was remaining in the bureau, we stayed friends long beyond our working together.

A female professional was still a rare occurrence in UNDP at the time, even at HQs. All managers and the overwhelming majority of line staff were male colleagues. Some of them had greater difficulties than others to accept us few women outside the secretarial ranks. It so happened that my colleague in the Bureau of Latin America and the Caribbean who assumed there the same functions as I did, was also a woman at the same professional level as I. We two made a formidable team in many inter-bureau meetings, and many of the older male managers confused us, attributing statements wrongly to either one of us.

² In China I had finally had my promotion to a higher grade. But I was still below the managerial level when I transferred to New York.

As we represented different regions, we often had to clarify matters after such meetings through written memos signed by our supervisors. This irritated both our supervisors and the recipients of such memos, and it annoyed us that we often had to repeat our statements in writing in order to be correctly listened to. It was amazing to see how selective our male colleagues could be in their perception of a contribution made by a female professional.

Female professionals as a rare breed

In the late 1970s/early 1980s, the share of female professionals in UNDP was somewhere between 10–12 percent and the glass ceiling for women was at the P4 level. Career advancement for women did not look too bright at the time, although the demands of the global women's movement were making itself felt within the UN, too. My counterpart in the regional bureau for Latin America, Emma Torres, and I became the *resident feminists* at UNDP HQs. Jointly we led a working group of the staff association to take stock of the situation of female professionals in UNDP, and to make recommendations to the personnel department on how the situation could be improved. We focused our attention on the career advancement opportunities and the breaking of the glass ceiling. We demanded a greater number of women on the annual promotion list and we proposed a much higher share of women to be recruited than men. We wanted to enlarge the pool of women rather than to go down the path of suggesting quotas per rank and organizational unit. We wanted to force the hand of managers to recognize the contributions women were making, even when they were different from the way our male colleagues expected and valued them. We basically wanted senior management in UNDP to hold line managers accountable for their professional handling of women, and we wanted them to establish quotas per department and office, if necessary. By the time, the situation improved both in terms of numbers and in terms of career prospects for female professionals in UNDP. But it was slow in coming, and only occurred when the top executive of the organization, Bill Draper, took a keen interest in the advancement of women. His successor, Gus Speth, eventually judged the performance of the managers who were directly reporting to him by the number of female professionals in their Bureau's staffing at Headquarters and in field offices.

The Arab world an area of little interest

A few months into my assignment, I began to realize that compared to the other units at HQs the Regional Bureau for Arab States was the smallest and considered the least important of all bureaux. As a result staff in the bureau was not making much of an effort to participate in initiatives which were of a global nature. And fairly often the views of the Bureau of Arab States were solicited as an afterthought rather than at the beginning of an inter-regional activity. My colleagues, in particular our Arab colleagues, accepted this attitude without much complaint. Their interest and loyalty was to the demands of the countries in the region more than to the demands of a global organization. Only when Siba Das, Mustapha Zaanouni, our regional director who came from Tunisia, and Basem Khader, another division chief, who was a Christian Palestinian, represented the interests of the Arab States region in inter-bureau meetings, were their views respected.

When I represented the bureau, I was exposed to benign neglect. Many of my colleagues could not understand why a European female, who had had a very promising professional record in the Asian and African region respectively, would work in the bureau for Arab countries. I realized that when I spoke, my contributions were not only ignored because I was a woman. In addition, I also met with ignorance by our colleagues from other bureaux about the Arab region and a lack of understanding and respect for the Arab culture. That was just what I needed to get my “fighting spirit” back into motion.

To my horror, I discovered in myself similar ignorance and prejudice about the Arab culture, and I began to attend Arabic language classes and I read about Arab history and Islamic culture. But even in New York this was not easy. There were remarkably few institutions and individuals dealing with the culture of the Arab world. For instance, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has a decent collection of Islamic art objects, but the section was often closed for lack of attending museum staff. In fact, while for events dealing with China there was any number of experts available to talk about developments. When it came to the Arab countries, mostly my Arabic UN colleagues were asked to serve as resource persons.

It also was frustrating that I could find few books and publications on the Arab region in New York. Eventually, I discovered that in Europe there was more to be found and I began to buy as much as I could either in London, Paris or Berlin on stopovers.

Global outlook from the UN and the American perspective

Despite its cultural roots in the European Anglo-Saxon tradition, life in the US turned out to be quite different from what my European upbringing had prepared me for. While the access to knowledge and information about the Arab world was difficult, it was even more so in the case of Africa. Mostly Afro-Americans were pursuing such interests and they were not particularly welcoming to those from outside their communities. In the US at the time, African countries were either economic basket cases or the mythical homeland for black Americans who were still struggling to be fully recognized in the US society. I got glimpses of this struggle through contacts with our African or Afro-American colleagues and through a few trips to the Southern states of the US. But the complexity of the relationships in the US led many Afro-Americans to withdraw from contacts with a white person. This defensiveness made my efforts somewhat tenuous, and eventually I avoided them. Inwardly I thought that the African chapter in my life had been closed, an erroneous view as it turned out later.

I was flabbergasted, but also saddened about the different esteem in which Europe, the Arab world and China were held in the US. The Arab world was left to small groups of people interested in such an exotic, difficult and alien culture, while New York's cultural scene exploded with exhibitions and events about China's history, tradition and long standing trading contacts between the US and China.

On the one hand, I was glad to deepen my knowledge about China and to stay in touch with friends and acquaintances from China. I felt that I remained engaged in the ever growing global significance of China. But I also felt disappointed that many around me could or would not appreciate the richness and wealth of the Arab culture. The Arabic literature, movies and other artistic expressions dealt in their own way with the human experience—as it applies to all of us. I painfully realized that the world at large was not accepting that we lived in a multi-cultural world. The expressions of how each civilization was

trying to find the way to its future³ from its past was not resonating in equal proportion in New York. I now believe that this neglect is one of the root elements of the enormous mistrust that exists between the US and most Islamic countries. Of course, there are many factors, but to see the US interest in the Islamic world by the administration of George W. Bush reduced to the fight against terrorism is a disquieting aspect of today's global life.

Travels in Arab countries

Fortunately, my work gave me the opportunity to travel to Arab countries. Over the years I visited North Africa (Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco) as well as the Middle East (Egypt, Jordan, Syria) and two of the Gulf countries (Kuwait and Bahrain). While I enjoyed the first-hand experience of life in these Arab countries, I also was acutely aware against the background of my China experience how slow moving and even stagnant in many respects the Arab societies were. Their appearance was old-fashioned. As a tourist, one might enjoy such a traditional way of life and find it picturesque, as a development professional, one wonders how long people will be able to earn a living with their old trades and occupations.

When I saw in Algerian towns young men whiling the time away, because they had left school, but did not find employment, I was wondering how long they might be content with such a life. When I observed in the Moroccan and Tunisian medinas the artisans working on traditional copper plates, furniture and textiles, the nagging question was: how much longer would such a situation last before it would either explode politically or degenerate into widespread poverty and hopelessness?⁴ Such visits brought home the realization that being able to purchase and use Western consumer goods was contri-

3 A few months before I left Cotonou to go to China, a West German journalist had interviewed me and asked me the question what I thought the future for the developing world was going to be and whether they all wanted to emulate the way of life of Western industrialized countries. I replied that I would not anticipate such a trend towards a "Westernization" of the rest of the world. Now, I experienced in New York that there were strong forces at play which made the Western culture to dominate the process of globalization. I found this trend deeply troubling.

4 Since the early 1980s, the Maghreb countries have seen the full range of political upheavals, poverty and malcontent. But they also have seen in some way modernization and an improvement in the living standards for a relatively small segment of the population.

buting little towards a change in the way people thought and behaved with each other in Arab countries. The reform-minded and ambitious members of the society left for other countries to get ahead. Through remittances to their families back home, they shared some of their economic success, but overall the Arab countries lost many of the professionals whom they so desperately needed for their development.

My social contacts in the countries I visited were mostly with the well-educated middle-class. Many of our locally recruited colleagues in the UNDP country offices came from such families. Educated in Western schools, they spoke fluent English and French. They were largely secular in their thinking and behavior, and many were women. UNDP as a fair-minded employer gave these women professionals a rare chance to be working in their own countries. In fact, the share of women professionals in our region's country offices was disproportionately high given the global average. But they also were aware of their exceptional circumstances and did not want to rock the boat too much in order not to lose the positions they had attained. Outside work, they remained dutiful wives to their husbands, many of whom held important positions in the government, the army or the local business community.

A special professional requirement for an international staff to be assigned to the Arab countries was the knowledge of Arabic, except in the North African countries, and the Levant (Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Syria); where on several occasions a non-Arabic speaking resident representative was assigned. In UNDP, Arabic speaking candidates were in short supply. As results of these staffing constraints our country programs were less vibrant than in other regions and often not focused on the strategic development issues in the region. Although there had been a series of very successful projects, e.g. setting up civil aviation authorities, telecommunication schools, meteorological services and the like, these projects continued beyond the point where UNDP assistance was truly required. They continued to support highly specialized interests and needs rather than to influence policies which would benefit the vast majority of people. The situation of women in all countries was deplorable. Poverty was widespread, both in towns but also in the countryside. Illiteracy, especially in the rural areas and among women, was pervasive. The golden era of Arab civilization was

long past and the heritage of enlightened philosophers, artists and scientists was little known. Many historical monuments lay in ruins.

Renewing UNDP's programs

One of the consequences of the programmatic staleness in our region was the strong pressure from UNDP's central management on the programs in Arab countries to give up scarce financial resources in favor of LDCs, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa. Besides, UNDP's managers in charge of the allocation of financial resources argued that the Arabic countries were rich and could fund their programs through cost-sharing, a modality which had been developed originally in Iran and further refined in Latin America. Given the scant knowledge about the Arab world, it was a hard struggle to convince our central management that not all Arab countries were rich, and that even those which were, had little interest and inclination to give funds to UNDP, unless we contributed at least a share from our own resources.⁵

After my first round of visits to Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, it was fairly obvious that our programs needed to be refreshed. They needed to be brought into line with new and emerging programmatic priorities of the organization. We at Headquarters therefore started to apply pressure on our resident representatives in the three Maghreb countries. We suggested that they should terminate a number of projects without any successor projects, so that a new set of projects could be initiated. We wanted these new projects to be central to the social development needs of these North African countries. It helped our efforts that our regional director came from Tunisia and was fully supportive. He also had the authority and the courage to face up to strong resistance at the mid-level of the national bureaucracies, who had an obvious interest to keep programs and projects running as usual. Business as usual produced less work for them and it gave them clout

⁵ In fact of the 24 countries, 5 were LDCs, Somalia, Sudan, Djibouti and the two Yemens, several were rich in per capita income (Gulf countries), but similar to LDCs in their domestic capacity. The remaining countries while having considerable professional and entrepreneurial potential were losing a lot of their brains and financial resources through capital flight and migration. The overall development landscape of the region was highly diversified with huge needs and demands for international cooperation. The UNDP program for Palestine by the way was handled out of the office of the chief executive of the organization given the highly sensitive nature of the program.

within the national administration beyond the reach of their normal functions.

I recall that during my first mission ever to the region I had to tell a cooperative of wine growers in Tunisia that UNDP assistance would be phased out. When we went to meet the cooperative, they invited us to the most sumptuous meal and selection of their best wines. But we held firm and politely said that they would be thriving without UNDP assistance from now on. And, of course, when I checked a few years later, they had continued to be very successful in their wine-making and the marketing of their products.

Algeria as a particular challenge

Modernizing our programs in Algeria was more difficult. The government made available substantial cost-sharing contributions⁶ for the purchase of equipment. As in any other socialist country, projects were selected from among those, which the government had identified as priorities in their national Five Year Plan. The problem was that in Algeria the social inequities were glaringly apparent and that the government should have “used” foreign partners like UNDP to get a handle on those. Instead, we continued with institution-building projects and the modernization of Algeria’s state run industries. In both fields, the UN system had no discernible comparative advantage of other potential partners, but the Algerian authorities did not want to widen the circle of their external partners. UNDP was thus in a very uncomfortable position. Either we had a program with huge cost-sharing—or we would have almost no program. Algerian bureaucrats were very prickly and, contrary to Chinese officials, not very open to suggestions from outsiders, even from the UN.

The situation of women and of adolescents was appalling. Women had lost the ground they had gained during the fight for independence and had slid back into a very traditional home-based role. The few women

⁶ Cost-sharing means that the national counterpart makes available funds which become an integral part of the UNDP budget, and are managed according to UNDP rules and procedures. The advantage for a national agency to proceed this way was that the national and the external contribution was much better synchronized during the execution of a project, and that the use of these funds, once transferred to UNDP, were unreservedly available for the purposes of the project.

in urban centers who maintained their professional careers sooner or later were leaving Algeria for France or other Western countries. The terrible violence, which erupted in Algeria some ten years later, was in the making then. We in UNDP felt that an early intervention in the mid-1980s might have helped to defuse the social tension and avoid the violence which later shook the country. But for the reasons already mentioned above, we did not succeed in convincing our national partners to shift the emphasis of our program.

I kept going though in my search of entry points for moving the country program into the direction of tackling poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. For this purpose, I travelled extensively in Algeria. Several of these trips took me deep into the Sahara, and on one of these trips I visited the oasis township of Ghardaia which Antoine St. Exupery had made famous. What I saw and experienced there shocked me. Like in the middle ages the gates of the oasis town were locked during the night and any visitor had to be registered with the town authorities.

All women between the ages of 15–54 were heavily veiled; they only had one eye uncovered during that period of their lives. Most men of this age group were working abroad in France and Germany supporting their families through remittances and occasional visits.

The market was a unique experience. Customers were sitting around the market square and the merchants walked with their wares from one to the other prospective buyer announcing as they walked the best prevailing offer they had received. They were selling their animals, vegetables or any other products like in an auction to the highest bidder. Of course, only men were participating in the auction. The sociologist in me was fascinated; the development professional was horrified about such old-fashioned practices.

At another time, I was making a visit to an ongoing project deep in the Sahara. In the mountains near the oasis of Tamanrasset, UNDP was funding the operations of a local weather monitoring station which was part of WMO's global meteorological monitoring network. The station was operated by a local Christian priest. Undoubtedly a worthwhile effort, but still not the most pressing need for UNDP financial support in Algeria as far as I was concerned. In agreement with the incumbent resident representative I was looking for partners

to establish a program in support of the social infrastructure in the Algerian oases. But neither during my visit to Ghardaia, nor in Tamarrasset was I able to contact local authorities with whom I could discuss such a possible cooperation. It was not even clear with whom I would have to discuss, the local government, the party officials and/or traditional leaders. My mission thus was not exactly a success.

A heart-warming experience

However, when I left I had a heart-warming experience. My local hosts bade me farewell at the airport leaving me alone to wait for the incoming aircraft, which was to bring me back to Algier. It was delayed and they did not want to wait for too long, in order to avoid having to travel on a bumpy road after nightfall. The ride back to town was long and there were rumors about local rebel groups which might hold up a government vehicle in the dark. The national program officer had left the previous day and so there I was, a single European woman, in a sea of milling Algerians waiting with ever increasing anxiety for the incoming flight. It was obvious that not all those who wanted to take this flight would be able to board, and I was wondering silently, what to do, if I got stuck. Eventually, the aircraft arrived and after a few passengers got off, it was immediately ready for boarding. All of a sudden a passageway opened in the pushing crowd in front of me, and I was looking behind to see which VIP was coming to command such respect. But there was nobody coming. People were giving me, the foreign woman, the first choice to board the plane. There was no word spoken, except that I murmured under my breath and in total amazement at such courtesy repeatedly “Shukran”, the Arabic word for “Thank you”. Once I was seated, all hell broke loose and people were fighting over each empty seat. It was one of those experiences where old customs and modern life intersect, and the old custom of protecting visiting foreigners from any harm prevailed, while the rest was a fight in which only the fittest succeeded.

Our programs in Morocco and Djibouti needed fewer stimuli from Headquarters. We had very proactive resident representatives at the time in both countries and governments who were receptive to new ideas. Both programs had few financial resources, but the UNDP offices had staff with innovative ideas. In Morocco they launched a

program of establishing maintenance facilities and processes for imported machinery and equipment. This became later on a large scale national effort, saving the government and individual businesses and many consumers considerable money. Small repairs could be carried out locally and spare part stocks could be maintained. This reduced the time—an item was not properly functioning and it prolonged the lifespan of equipment and household appliances. In addition, better and regular maintenance saved costs and foreign exchange.

Changing functions

After about nine months in the regional bureau I had the opportunity to change to another position. I became the program policy officer for the whole bureau, a post more interesting in a HQs setting than the functions of an area officer. The Regional Director wanted me in this position and I was very interested in this type of work. He had seen how we had begun to “clean up” our programs in the Maghreb countries and he wanted to extend a similar process to the rest of the region. I on the other hand was eager to learn more about other Arabic countries. Being the policy officer for the programs in the whole region, I was in charge of developing and promoting common themes for UNDP’s country and regional programs. Initially, this was a great task. The region was much diversified. The range of development levels reached from LDCs (Sudan, Yemen and Somalia) to high income, oil exporting countries, which faced very similar institutional and professional capacity constraints for their national development. Between these two groups were threshold countries like Lebanon and Jordan, and lower middle income countries like the Maghreb countries which had sufficient national development capacity, but serious financial constraints.

To detect commonalities was not an easy analytical exercise. Through many discussions, country visits and comparison with other regions, especially Latin America, we eventually developed three themes:

- *The strengthening of the indigenous professional capacity in the region.*
- *The networking of institutions with similar mandates throughout the region, and*

- *The development and use of stronger ties with regional Arab organizations.*⁷

I was particularly interested in the first theme. The longer I worked in the bureau, the more I was struck by the huge number of Arab professionals who lived and worked in the US and Western Europe. It appeared a waste of scarce financial resources that the UN and other development agencies were recruiting and posting non-Arab professionals to serve on long-term contracts in the countries of the region. The question was whether what had worked well in China and other countries, such as Turkey and India, would also work within the Arab region. I was aware that China had made it attractive to overseas Chinese to return to China and that in spite of the large number of Chinese living abroad, there still was an even larger number of professionals in China. This was not necessarily true in many Arab countries. Still, it was worth a try whether UNDP might successfully localize professional services and thus could reduce the dependence on non-Arab experts in the context of its technical cooperation programs. A potential, second benefit could be that enhanced and enlarged contacts of Arab professionals with their counterparts in Arab countries could help to set political and social changes in motion, which clearly were slow in coming. In many ways this was a long shot, but still it was one of the means at the disposal of the UN to foster peaceful social and political changes in these countries.

A good start, but then resistance

In the beginning our initiative went well. We had enthusiastic response from the Arab communities abroad and many Arab professionals went on consultancy assignments under a UNDP contract producing good results. But as the numbers increased, resistance started to build up. Some experts did not want to go to certain countries, and countries did not want to accept certain experts. We were at a loss to fully understand the reasons, but slowly we reverted back to recruiting non-Arab experts.

⁷ The Arab region has a full “replica” of the UN system exclusively dealing with the needs of the countries who are members of the Arab League. This includes a development funding organization, AGFUND, which provides funding for development assistance to the poorer members of the Arab League and to other countries with large Islamic populations in Africa and Asia.

Technical assistance programs are to be executed within an established timeframe. But enhancing the acceptance of expatriate Arabs needed more time, patience and perseverance than we could afford. Initiating such a change from New York also did not help, as not all of our resident representatives were undertaking the necessary advocacy and persuasion. When one of our bureau colleagues went on mission to his home country, Algeria, he was arrested on drummed up charges. We did manage to have him released within a short period of time, but the program of localizing professional capacity was after that incidence completely dead.

Networking and twinning – a promising means to foster development

We turned our attention to the networking theme and institutional twinning arrangements. Since the early 1960s, UNDP had assisted in setting up in almost all countries of the region training institutes for technical services, such as civil aviation and telecommunications. These institutes had matured over the decades with increased national funding into organizations where most of the Arab technical staff for these services was trained. These were success stories by anyone's standards. UNDP had helped at the inception and over time reduced its funding and involvement while the national authorities assumed full responsibility. But all of these institutes worked isolated from each other. New technologies rolled in. Curricula needed to be revised and new training equipment needed to be bought. Synergies between and among these institutes could not only reduce costs to the individual institute, they could also facilitate and accelerate the adaptation process. The start up of these networks was slow, but when we offered to support such networking under our regional program, progress was made. When I left the bureau after three years, we had succeeded in getting several of these networks up and running. We thus considered initiatives under this theme mostly successful.

I was less involved in operationalizing the third theme. This was largely in the hands of our Arab colleagues, who worked on establishing contacts with Arabic regional organizations which had been ignored or neglected by UNDP so far. The original reluctance of these organizations to deal with UNDP was overcome and after several years we

finally had excellent working relationships with AGFUND and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Translating policy into programs

One of the biggest challenges for such policy work is to cast it in a way that it is useful to colleagues in charge of programming (in country offices) and the appraisal of proposed programs (at Headquarters).⁸ One way was to demand that mandatorily the policy officer of the bureau should be participating in the project appraisal process. Given the fact that we had a large number of projects terminating for which we had to initiate an evaluation and that new projects needed to be appraised and approved without long delays, this approach would have very soon led to a bureaucratic gridlock, and that at a time where UNDP was delegating more and more programming authority to resident representatives. Therefore, our colleagues would not only resist our initiatives for change, because they were not in agreement with us, but also, because they felt that we were not in step with the wave of increased delegation to resident representatives who swept through the organization. We had to choose another way if we wanted to succeed with our demands for change. We began to collect experiences of new cooperation projects from around the region and we organized regional workshops for program staff to share such experience. This formed the basis for a common policy position which could be followed across the region and applied appropriately in each country. I as the policy officer at Headquarters could play a less visible role, while still driving the process of change through the organization of the seminars and active follow-up.

⁸ A technical assistance project runs through a cycle of design/formulation – appraisal – approval – implementation/monitoring and evaluation. Over the years, the execution of the each stage was greatly revised. When I started, many projects were designed and formulated by a technical agency of the UN system. UNDP at Headquarters for larger projects and in country offices for smaller projects undertook the appraisal, i.e. assessed the validity of the design and the clarity of the formulation. UNDP also ensured during such an appraisal that its policy priority was met, such as women's participation, national capacity building etc. While the implementation was left to the national counterparts and an external technical partner, UNDP monitored progress against the stated objectives and initiated an independent evaluation during the second half of a project's duration or upon its termination.

Still, some resident representatives thought that Headquarters was given greater authority to the country offices with one hand, and took it away with the other. Many of the long serving country office program staff had difficulties in translating the experience from other countries into concepts which would be valid in their country. Others were straightforwardly objecting to such a more common approach in a region which was known for its frictions and divergence in views and positions. Against all this resistance, we held firm and eventually some of our colleagues saw the value of this approach. It would give UNDP a profile and an image, which they could promote and it gave them a way to say “no” to requests for more traditional projects from national authorities.

The Chinese and Arab culture – similarities and differences

During my assignment as policy officer I traveled to other parts of the region beyond the Maghreb. I visited twice Egypt and Jordan; I went on mission to Syria, and to two Gulf States, Kuwait and Bahrain. It gave me an inkling of the great variety in the Arab region which was held together by a common cultural heritage, language and religious belief. Although there was great diversity, even to the point of hostile controversy, it nevertheless gave the region an identity which is not easy to define and comprehend by an outsider. Arabs preserve their cultural identity quite differently from the way the Chinese feel and understand their cultural identity. While the Chinese import and assimilate, the Arabs are wide open to any influence, but retain a core which mostly stems from the past as nomadic tribes. In both cultures, the family is the center for the individual, but while the Chinese are mostly secular, in the Arab culture religion plays an important part.

After about three years of my assignment to the Bureau, our collective efforts with the firm support from our regional director began to create a renewal of our programs in the region. The renaissance of the UNDP programs in the Arab States region was not to everybody's liking. In particular, our colleagues in the central administration had plans to abolish the bureau and to merge it with a smaller unit for South Eastern European countries. Our approval of a new generation of programs and our success in attracting new staff and financial resources to UNDP was running counter to such plans. In part I was

given responsibility for this renaissance, which some senior managers considered an achievement, others a nuisance. What I learned in this assignment one more time was that the assessment of results is very dependent on whose interests they serve.

At the age of 40 – staying put or moving on

In August 1985 I turned 40. I decided to celebrate my birthday in a big way and invited about 50 people to my small one bedroom apartment in Greenwich Village. A friend whom I knew from China came down from Vermont to help with the preparations. The day turned out to be literally the hottest day of the summer with a temperature approaching 40 degrees centigrade in the afternoon. We had the air-conditioners going full blast from the early morning hours in order to cool down the apartment as much as possible. We had to take a cab to transport the ice cream cakes only a few blocks, because we were afraid they would melt if we walked the short distance. As a theme I had chosen “Over the hill and still rolling”. It said what I felt. In many regards I was comfortable in my skin, yet I also knew that the next few years would determine whether I was staying in New York or moving on, whether I would advance in my career or drop out.

My personal life in New York was rich and fulfilling, my professional life was satisfying. Staying put would mean to get stuck at the habitual glass ceiling for women, moving on meant giving career advancement priority, but would also demand many more sacrifices in my personal life. Eventually, I moved on and up; not totally out of my own free will, but still to greener pastures.

The winds of change reach UNDP

In the summer of 1985, the Administrator of UNDP changed. Bradford Morse left for a post in the UN secretariat and William Draper III replaced him. Bill Draper had been the chief executive of the EXIM Bank of the US and before that he was a venture capitalist. His understanding of development was about getting markets and investments right, taking risks and giving people opportunities. He had little time and patience for all the slow moving procedures and rules of a public sector organization like UNDP. He wanted decisions, and the right people in the right place. He was interested in growth and efficiency

and not in cutbacks and savings. He wanted value for money and was willing to spend the necessary funds. He was of the view good programs find funding, not the other way round. He revolutionized UNDP.⁹

One of his first decisions was to change the Director of Personnel. He promoted an Irish staff member, Denis J. Halliday, to this position, and moved the incumbent director out to an advisory position. Several other senior positions were falling vacant at the time, and he filled them in an unconventional way. For instance, the director of our bureau left in late 1985.¹⁰ He was not replaced by another Arab, but by a UNDP career staff, Krishna Singh, an Indian, who had spent most of his professional life in Latin America. Bill also let it be known that he only wanted to appoint senior managers who had served recently in the field, and that he expected all Headquarters staff, who were not specialists, to rotate back to the field after five years of service in New York. His pronouncements sent shockwaves through Headquarters and made our colleagues in country offices smile. For any vacant resident representative post, Bill asked for three suggestions, one of which had to be a woman. The list of qualifying female professionals was short, and Bill became increasingly frustrated. One year into his assignment he threatened that he would recruit massively from outside the organization if no good internal female candidates were available. He also transferred several senior level posts to the field reducing career prospects in New York. I was keeping my head down. Although I was not yet approaching the 5 year limit by early 1986, I was ready to make a change at Headquarters, as I wanted to be promoted to the next higher level. A suitable post in the small Unit for Europe had fallen vacant and I applied for it and was selected. In the mean-

⁹ The best example for his spirit and attitude was that after 1989, he decided to open UNDP country offices in the CIS countries and Eastern Europe and to upgrade the Unit for Europe to a full-fledged regional bureau. He did so, even before he had the formal approval of the governing bodies of UNDP. He also introduced the Human Development Report, even though many member states were deadily opposed to a strong advocacy publication by UNDP. In-house, we were grateful for Bill's strong views and position, as they clearly gave UNDP a new lease on life in the globalization which was beginning to take shape.

¹⁰ More than 20 years later, in February 2006, I went on a private visit to Tunis. Somehow Mr. Zaanouni had learned that I was visiting, tracked me down and invited me to a family dinner on the occasion of Idd celebrations. It was a rare sign of friendship and I was very touched by his hospitality which was welcoming and overwhelming.

time, Bill Draper had not given any of the women who had applied for a resident representative position the go ahead. The Division of Personnel therefore was looking at the more junior women as candidates, and so I appeared on their radar screen.

Falling upstairs on the career ladder

Several posts in Africa were to be filled and the regional bureau for Africa was not able to propose any women. Bill therefore enquired about me. He did not know me, but my name had been brought to his attention through my move to the post in the Unit for Europe. People were silent, they knew that I was not interested to go to the field as yet, but at the same time, there was this opportunity to give me a big promotion. As I was not party to any of these discussions, I cannot report what actually happened. But I was told that in a meeting where candidates for the resident representative post in Malawi were reviewed between Bill Draper, the Director of Personnel, Denis Halliday, and the Regional Director for Africa, Mr. Damiba, and Bill decided without any further consultations that I should go to Malawi. He thought that this was a suitable country for a woman, and he did not consider the aspect of seniority or the lack thereof any hindrance.¹¹

A friend in the Division of Personnel tipped me off, and informed me to expect a call from her Director. She also reminded me that I truly did not have a choice. I had been one of those who had pressed for women to be promoted into senior positions. Therefore, here was my chance. After my initial shock, I replied to Denis Halliday when he called, that I would think it over. And so I did. Eventually, I said with trepidations I would go, but only after being promoted. What followed were terrible weeks and months. First I read up what I could about Malawi, and what I read sounded actually very good. Secondly, I saw Bill Draper for the first time in a one on one meeting, and really liked him. Our discussion was not about Malawi, but about China. The Headquarters Project Appraisal Committee, which he chaired, had just rejected two project requests from China and he wanted to know from me what I thought about these projects and the justification for UNDP assistance. I was not familiar with either project, and I had to

¹¹ The resident representative post in Malawi was graded two levels above the grade which I held personally.

make my comments without much knowledge, only based on what Bill told me. But he seemed to like my reaction, especially when I came to a different conclusion than he had. And so our meeting ended by him saying “Have fun in Malawi!”

I was not yet ready to accept the assignment. I went to Personnel and reiterated that I would only go if I were promoted to the next higher level.¹² Furthermore, I told them that I did not want to be singled out. I added that I knew many other female colleagues who were eager to become resident representatives, while I wasn’t really all that excited about the move for myself at this point in time. Therefore only on these two conditions was I willing to accept, but for the time being I would continue my function in the Unit for Europe. Inwardly I was hoping that my “conditions” would not work out, and I would have two more years in New York, where I was not missing anything.¹³

In the meantime, my case was hotly debated all over Headquarters. Some people thought this was a great decision by the Administrator. Others thought it was playing havoc with a well-established practice. Some considered my selection unfair, because I had not yet served as a deputy resident representative and I had not even applied for the post. Those who knew me felt sorry for me and wanted to help me against Bill’s railroading.

Eventually, the situation came to a decision point for me, where I had one of two choices: either stay put (and get stuck professionally, while enjoying a comfortable life) or move to Malawi (and advance rapidly professionally with unknown consequences for my personal life). Several senior managers began to weigh in and said to me that I should go without any hesitation. They were convinced that I would succeed and they promised me the full support of Headquarters. Luckily for me, their promises proved to be correct, and I certainly received a lot of excellent support from Headquarters during my first year in Malawi.

¹² In UNDP’s rotation system it was possible to fill a post with a staff that had a grade one level lower or higher than the post. For instance, a P4 level staff can fill either a P3 or P5 level post. Yet, the Malawi post was two levels higher than my personal grade.

¹³ Not all my colleagues liked to be stationed in New York. Colleagues from developing countries with families found it hard to live in New York. But for a single person like me it was perfect.

From mid-May 1987 onwards, things started to move very rapidly: I was promoted to the next higher level, and two other women were offered positions as resident representatives. One was at the same level as I and she had accepted the assignment. Therefore, by early June, there was no escaping: I was to go to Malawi. Of course, the necessary government clearances had to come through. A first set of papers were lost, whether intentionally or accidentally was never clarified. The Malawian permanent representative to the UN invited me for lunch and apologized profusely. He later became a dear friend, whom I visited frequently on his farm when he returned from his New York assignment to Malawi.

Malawi's clearance came through in early July and shortly thereafter I left via Europe to return for the third time to live in Africa, in yet another part of this vast and in many ways enticing continent.



First Development Goal-Fighting Poverty and Hunger

4. The Woman In Charge: Lilongwe/Malawi – Sub-Saharan Africa The Second Time (1987 – 1990)

The way from New York to Africa and many other countries east of the US most conveniently leads via Europe. I booked my flights out of New York as often as possible via Frankfurt. These had the additional advantage that I could stopover and visit my mother who lived in a small village about 70 km north of the airport.

Over the years these stopovers proved to provide a welcome rest from the long intercontinental flights. It was easy to relax in the garden or during long walks through the forests and along the river Lahn, apart from being served my favorite dishes. Neighbors always wondered how it felt to be stopping over in a German village on my way from New York to Lilongwe or Beijing or any of the other exotic places my travels took me to. Little did they know that such a rest stop was indispensable to keep body and spirit fresh in order to endure frequent long distance flights, particular those which were overnight. To me the thought of climbing into mother's cherry tree to plug cherries or to eat berries straight from the bush were the greatest luxuries to look forward to during a long overnight flight.

Of course, my stopover on my way to Lilongwe was not quite as relaxing. I was anxious about what lay ahead. I was assuming a job that I had not aspired to. Would it be too big for me? What would happen if I failed? Besides, I did not know this part of Africa; I did not know the country, except for what I had read about it. Malawi's reputation was mixed, because of its Life President's quirky attitudes and political stands. On the other hand, it was one of the few countries which stayed out of major crises, and the international news. Before I left New York, a friend said Malawi must be a successful place, as one does not read about it in the papers. When Malawi later became internationally known, it was quite exceptionally for a positive reason.

My arrival and settling in was made easier by the fact that I had an official residence assigned which was furnished. Although I had packed

up my household in New York and shipped it to Lilongwe, I could move into the residence even before the arrival of my shipment. A few weeks after my arrival, my mother came to visit and helped me to set up my household. She sewed curtains and trained the cook and house servant whom I had newly recruited. I could thus fully focus on my work, which was a great relief, because pressing demands on my time and attention came from various directions.

Straighten things out

First, I inherited a dispirited office. My predecessor had been fired, which was unheard of in UNDP until then. He had left a bad impression with the national authorities and the program was not moving. As one of the biggest programs in Africa for UNDP, Headquarters wanted me to increase the commitment of available funds and to raise the program implementation rate. While I was willing to respond to this demand, I also wanted to develop a program which was useful to Malawi and address core development challenges of the country. Malawi had been dealt a weak deck of cards. It was landlocked and because of the civil war in Mozambique was cut off from its nearest sea ports for the exports of its agricultural products and the importation of essential equipment. It produced high quality agricultural products, like tea and tobacco, but the quantities were too small to give Malawian producers a say in the international markets. It was a densely populated country in which only after independence efforts had been made to give all children a chance at primary school education. While there were many well-educated Malawians in the mid-1980s, illiteracy was still widespread, especially among women. Besides, many Malawians with a university degree lived and worked abroad. For instance, there were more Malawian medical doctors practicing outside Malawi than in Malawi. When I arrived, I had the ambition to have the UNDP program make a difference in Malawi, and to strategically strengthen the assets of the country and to compensate for the weaknesses. Many donors did not give assistance to Malawi because of the political regime. I decided that I would not be able to do much about the political situation, except to support that part of the national policy which was addressing the immediate needs of the poorer segments of the population. I also wanted to work with that part of the national government and with non-governmental organizations which were free of

corruption and committed to the common good¹. Most specifically, I wanted to apply what I had learned in China about supporting reforms, and position the UNDP program in such a way that it would serve as a dynamic agent for Malawian socio-economic development.²

There were many staff members who did not know a lot about UNDP, its mandate, philosophy, its rules and procedures and I had little room to delegate authority. Hence, if I did not want to do everything myself, I had to keep a close watch over the work which members of my staff carried out. As one of the results of such close supervision, almost all office correspondence was flowing over my desk if not for signature then at least for my clearance. Mountains of correspondence needed to be attended to, while at the same time I also had to make my rounds of initial visits and attend to a very special emergency situation: the constant inflow of Mozambican refugees into Malawi.

Not all staff members welcomed my firm hand. Some also resented that I came for work to the office at unusual hours, e.g. on Sunday mornings. One such Sunday morning I was sitting in my office going over unattended correspondence from the previous week, when I heard some noise at the entrance door to the front office. Nobody came and I went back to my papers. When I wanted to leave I found that the door had been locked from the outside. I found this strange, as I was sure I had left the door unlocked, but I got out my key, unlocked the door and left.

Sometime later Dennis Dzinkambani, a junior clerk from the finance section, asked me coyly how I had managed to get out of my office that day. I replied matter-of-factly that I had used my key. Through this question I finally had confirmation for what I had suspected all along. Finance staff working at the time in the office had wanted to discourage me from coming to the office on Sundays, when they were

¹ The term common good carried for some the connotation of a socialist concept, which was considered politically incorrect in pro-Western Malawi. Little did these critics know that in any democracy this is a core value. Fortunately, President Banda knew this.

² Years later a Malawian friend told me: “It is amazing how influential you were on many policy issues in Malawi mainly through projects as instruments for such influence. Compare this to the failures through direct approaches at upstream policy advice!!! Again, it is not the size of projects or programs that matters but the strategic location and the role of the leader, in this case the RC/UNDP Representative.”

enjoying the calm of an air-conditioned office and no one around to disturb their peace. I spoke to the staff representative about this incidence, and he tried to convince me that this had been a mishap. I let it be. Inwardly, I was chuckling, but I also informed staff that I expected them to organize their work in such a way that they could finish it during normal office hours. Overtime work on Sundays needed in future prior approval by my deputy and would only be granted in exceptional cases. Dennis moved on to obtain the qualification of a full-fledged accountant with some financial help from UNDP which I obtained for him.

Many years beyond my assignment and his working for UNDP in Lilongwe, Dennis sent me packages of wonderful Malawian tea which he knew I liked. Whether he did this still out of lingering embarrassment or gratitude I do not know. There were others who checked me out. In the fall of 1987, I had requested a particular consultant from the Regional Bureau for Africa, and received as response that he would be available at the earliest in the spring of the following year. I was annoyed, but did not want to pick a fight. Then in late November I learned that another consultant was immediately available if I wanted him. Without much hesitation I accepted the proposed alternative candidate, an American from a Washington based firm, which I knew from my earlier assignment in China.

When the gentleman came, he had little knowledge about the subject he was recruited for. He also took all his appointments with the government and other missions by himself, asking for close to no support from the UNDP office, which was unusual. When the time came for his departure, he did not ask to debrief me, instead prepared a cable to his company reporting on the results of his mission. As I had introduced that all outgoing cables had to come to me for clearance, I saw it before it was sent, and stopped it. After all, this gentleman was there on a UNDP contract, and his first obligation was to debrief us in UNDP and not his company. When he came to my office to enquire what had happened to his cable I explained my action to him and he willingly changed the text so that it would go to our Headquarters and not to his company. A few days later, I met a staff member of USAID in the street, and he warmly greeted me and shook my hand for a long time. He was a kind young man, who was rumored to be the local

CIA liaison officer. Then the pieces fell into place: in China, UNDP had employed the company of this consultant for a project dealing with the delivery of sensitive computer technology for which we had needed COCOM approval³. Now I also had the approval of the CIA for my assignment as resident representative in Malawi, a country the US government gave strategic importance to in the region. Months later I enquired whether this consultant had been recruited for other missions, too. I was told that this had been the only one he ever undertook for UNDP.⁴ Whether the regional bureau knew about the CIA affiliation of this consultant or not, I never knew.

Dealing with the inflow of refugees

One of my very first initiatives after my arrival in Lilongwe in July 1987 was to field a multi-agency UN mission with members from UNDP, UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF to assess the extent of the flood of refugees coming to Malawi from neighboring Mozambique and to give us estimates and advice on the volume and best forms of international support to Malawi to shoulder this humanitarian crisis. So far the Malawian government had provided land, shelter and food on their own, but it was apparent that soon the number of refugees would be too big for Malawi to cope with it and the burden of the ever increasing number of refugees was felt by the surrounding Malawi communities.

Among other things, I had asked the mission to estimate the likely inflow of additional refugees. They developed three scenarios, one of which anticipated that the number of refugees would grow to 1 million over time. During the debriefing I told the mission leader, I did not want to hear of this scenario. In a country of 8 million, to consider food, clothing and provide shelter to 1 million refugees was a scary prospect. Yet, when I left Malawi at the end of 1990, the total number of Mozambican refugees did indeed reach the 1 million mark, and the refugee settlements were beginning to distort the local economy and strain the physical environment. Water and sanitation and the

³ For further details see chapter 2 above.

⁴ This particular consultant may have been only once on a UN contract. However, it was well known that the US and later the European governments were checking out senior UN staff, and were intervening not always in the most diplomatic way to see colleagues removed from their posts when they did not approve of the work they did.

provision of fuel wood for household use were among the biggest challenges, as was the education of children who either spoke a local language, for which there were no teaching materials, or needed to be taught in Portuguese, the official language of Mozambique. We in the UN wanted to do everything which would prepare these children to return to where they and their parents had come from, and supported through UNICEF and UNHCR the teaching in Portuguese.

It was a constant struggle to convince humanitarian aid agencies outside of Malawi to respect the Malawian government's policy and position that these refugees were in the country only temporarily. One of the consequences of this policy was that the Malawian authorities allowed the Mozambican chiefs to govern the camps. They let them organize the internal distribution of goods and other relief items, and they gave the approval that in the refugee camps children were taught in Portuguese. On the other hand the Malawi government did not allow the refugees to enter the Malawian labor market. This policy encouraged a lot of the male refugees to go back to their villages across the border during the day and cultivate their fields. This was particularly true in the Dedza and Ntcheu districts. It also laid the ground for their immediate return to their home village, after an armistice had been reached between the warring parties in Mozambique. They resumed their life without waiting for international agencies to arrange for their return. When in 1992 I came back to Malawi for a short visit, it was eerie to see the huge former refugee settlements abandoned with empty huts still standing, except for their tin roofs, which the refugees had taken with them across the border to their home villages.

In the course of our relief operations, we were not always agreed among the UN organizations what the best way forward was for us.

Three events I remember most vividly.

The first occurred on Christmas Day in 1988 near Blantyre. If the short rains in October failed, then there were always local food shortages around Christmas in Malawi. Of course, international food supplies for refugees were not affected by such vagaries of the weather, and WFP distributed its food rations to the refugees irrespective of the local harvest. That year, the short rainy season had not occurred, and many local households had run out of food supplies by late December.

Quite understandably, they queued up for WFP food supplies at the refugee distribution points, yet the local WFP relief officer refused to give Malawians any of the food rations.

The situation came to a boil after a few days and the Malawians threatened to storm the distribution point. He wanted to get on with the distribution rather than to call the police and distributed some food rations to the complaining Malawians. Only afterwards did he find the time to call his superior in Lilongwe and told him what had happened, and how he had reacted. But rather than to receive understanding for what might have turned out to become an eruption of violence, the young officer was reprimanded for his unauthorized action. He came up to Lilongwe and told me that he was devastated and ready to resign.

Although this was an internal WFP matter, I got engaged in my capacity as UN Resident Coordinator, and spoke to the WFP responsible officer. Yet, he did not see how he could cover for the “wrongfully distributed food quantities” and was not prepared to either inform his Headquarters and the Malawian government of the young man’s decision and action. Instead, I informed WFP in Rome and the Malawian government and pleaded for understanding and a solution.

As was to be expected, both found a way to replenish the refugee food supplies by what was estimated to have been “wrongfully” distributed to needy Malawians, and the government continued to provide some food aid to the affected Malawian households from its grain reserve until the next harvest was coming in.

The second incidence occurred in another remote location where refugees came across the border in small groups. The system was set up in such a way that WFP would provide the food rations to UNHCR based on the latter’s list of refugees having received refugee cards. Invariably, the number of those holding cards and those coming to the distribution points was higher than the rations which WFP had made available. So accusations were flying between WFP and UNHCR officers that they were sabotaging the relief operations or that one side was cheating the other. To me it was quite clear that at the time WFP had to make its demands for the release of food rations, the numbers were lower than the number of cards UNHCR had issued by the time the food arrived.

Eventually, I called in both officers and we reviewed the situation and sketched out a possible solution. Before our meeting ended I admonished both that such quarrels were unbecoming of UN officers and that I hoped that this problem was solved. If not, I would regrettably have to ask both their Headquarters to remove them from the Malawi operation. Of course, they found a way to estimate how many additional rations needed to be included in the calculations so that by the time the actual distribution occurred, enough rations were available.

Blending humanitarian and development aid – not always easy

In the third instance we were not as successful. Every other year, Malawi had a donor Consultative Group Meeting (CGM) at the World Bank offices in Paris. The meeting was normally chaired by a Vice-President of the World Bank. Its purpose was to review the socio-economic situation of the country, to raise donor funds for the next two years and to agree on national policy priorities and donor support for such policies. Malawi had embraced the structural adjustment programs of the World Bank and the IMF early on.⁵

Providing a safe haven to large numbers of refugees from neighboring countries was not foreseen. Yet, when a CGM was scheduled for the summer of 1989, it was quite apparent that the influx of Mozambican refugees had a major impact on the local economy which needed to be factored into the economic projections for the coming years. In the UN system, we were particularly interested in seeing larger investments going into rural water and sanitation schemes and into reforestation or a better organization of fuel food supplies from the

⁵ UNDP had introduced these donor consultations in the late 1970s in the form of round-table group meetings. These were held in the country, led by the national government, and meant to enhance donor coordination with national priorities but also to avoid duplication of donor efforts. When the World Bank took hold of these processes, they became more successful in terms of raising funding, but the leadership for such meetings migrated from the national governments to the World Bank, and pledges for donor funds were more closely linked to the structural adjustment programs propagated by the World Bank and the IMF. UNDP and other UN organizations continued to participate in these meetings, normally relegated to merely dealing with the aspects of technical assistance programs. The original purpose of providing an open dialogue forum with an honest broker role for the UN system organizations was lost to these meetings, although throughout the 1980s and over part of the 1990s, the CGMs continued to be the main vehicle for raising donor funding for specific countries.

forest plantation in the Northern part of Malawi. But the World Bank as the host of the meeting was not interested in including these topics into the discussions. When the participating Minister of Finance said that he would chair such a session, the Bank staff relented, but made sure that all donors said that such programs should be included in ongoing programs without any additional funding being available for these demands. Practically, our initiative had been killed, except for the fuel wood component.

In the Northern part of the country, there were huge forest plantations which had been planted during the colonial years and in the early years after independence. But they were poorly managed and a lot of deadwood remained in the forests increasing the fire hazard. When local businessmen heard of the UN's demands to provide the refugees with fuel from alternative sources than the forests around the refugee camps, they organized the collection of the deadwood and their transport to the refugee camps in the South. Through this initiative the pressure on the dwindling forest resources in the Southern part of the country was relieved and the maintenance of the forest plantations in the North improved. Besides, local Malawian entrepreneurs drew some financial benefits from the country's hospitality to people from neighboring Mozambique in need of help.

But the water and sanitation needs remained unattended. Looking back, it almost appears like a miracle that we were not faced with a major epidemic outbreak of water-borne diseases. The Malawian health services supported by UNICEF, WHO and NGOs were closely monitoring the situation and succeeded in catching outbreaks of cholera or other diseases early. They provided treatment when the number of infected people was still small enough to avoid a further spread.

All in all, it probably was one of the most successful refugee operations ever mounted on the African continent, and at the same time the least publicized and documented.

First encounter with President Banda

Yet, before I could even get involved actively in the coordination and programming of such development and relief efforts of the UN system, I had to present my credentials to the Head of State, H.E. the Life Presi-

dent Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda. I had planned my arrival so that I would be in Malawi in mid-July shortly after the National Day celebrations, well knowing that an arrival immediately before the National Day might produce a somewhat awkward situation. On the one hand, the President and his staff were busy with the preparations for the celebrations, and it would be difficult to get an appointment. On the other hand, I would only be able to attend the official functions after I had presented my appointment letters. Being in the country and not being able to attend the ceremonies would be a shaky beginning to my assignment.

The plan worked well. I received an appointment within a few days after my arrival, although I had to go to Zomba where the President was still in residence after the National Day. I thus drove down for the first time from Lilongwe to Zomba, a trip that I must have done close to 100 times during my assignment, and of which I never became tired, as it is one of the most scenic roads in Southern Africa, which at the time also was in immaculate condition, thus making it an easy and pleasurable ride.

In 1987, each UNDP Resident Representative also held the position of UNFPA and WFP Representative and UN Resident Coordinator concurrently. For each appointment, we had to present a separate letter from the respective head of agency. When I had handed in two of the four letters, I got so embarrassed, that I handed in the next two saying: "Sir, they pretty much say the same as the other two." The President smiled and proceeded to welcome me as a German, remembering the visit of one of the former Presidents of Germany and speaking about the excellent relationship which existed between Malawi and Germany. I opened my response by saying that I hoped that the relationship with the UN were equally fruitful. Well, I did not get any further then this opening statement, because Dr. Banda lapsed into a diatribe about the arrogance and willfulness of the UN over its sanctions against South Africa.⁶ I was not sure what to make of this,

⁶ Dr. Banda was making reference to the UN sanctions against the apartheid regime in South Africa. Malawi was at the time the only Sub Saharan African country, which had diplomatic relations with South Africa, and was defying UN sanctions. Dr. Banda had even been on an official state visit in 1971, forcing the South African government to extend the full protocol of a visiting head of state to him during his visit. Dr. Banda felt this was a better way to force the apartheid regime to change its policy towards its black majority population than the UN sanctions.

and my audience was over pretty soon. At the end of our meeting, he did, however, extend a warm welcome to me and invited me to come and see him any time I wanted to do so.

After this first encounter, I was not sure that I wanted to seek such appointments too frequently, especially after I had heard that if one mentioned to him problems during such visits, he would have heads roll in his government. I certainly did not want to acquire the reputation of causing heads to roll, nor did I want to just tell him what would please him and his entourage.

I therefore chose to have a weekly meeting with the Secretary of the President and Cabinet and left it to him to bring to the President's attention what he felt was appropriate. This approach worked well. In one instance it even led to a change in presidential policy regarding the country's communications infrastructure which nobody at the time ever thought possible.

Stimulating policy change

Shortly after independence Dr. Banda had ruled that Malawi did not need television. He considered it bad for people and in particular for children, as it would distract them from doing their homework. Consequently, even in the late 1980s, Malawi did not have a national television system and was not poised to get one. However, under my predecessor, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the UN organization in charge of communications infrastructure, had obtained UNDP funding for the elaboration of a national communications master plan. This plan was completed a few months after my arrival and ITU wanted me to present it to the President. Yet, when I enquired who in the government had seen the draft and had signed off on the plan, which among others made provision for the establishment of a national television network, I could not identify anyone in the national government who had seen and cleared the plan. I therefore wrote to the government through the Ministry of Finance, and suggested a national seminar to review and assess the proposed plan and to make recommendations for the attention of the minister who was in charge of communications, a portfolio, which was held by the President.

The government accepted my proposal and proceeded to organize

the seminar, which with minor changes recommended the adoption of the plan. It was the general practice that after such a seminar the recommendations would go to the cabinet for their further consideration and decision. The permanent secretary in charge of communications was extremely nervous about presenting the results of the seminar knowing full well that the recommendations asked for a major policy change.

According to what I was told afterwards, everybody was holding their breath, when the President, who was chairing the cabinet session, took the floor and proceeded to say that what was a correct decision in the late 1960s was not necessarily the right decision in the late 1980s. He believed that this was a solid plan and that he as the minister in charge was recommending its approval. The cabinet thus approved the plan, and the President signed off on it shortly thereafter.

Immediately after we had heard of the approval, we sent several young Malawian journalists abroad to train for television programming. By the time I left the country, I was fairly close to obtaining donor funding for establishing the first national television studio in the country and to equip all primary schools with one TV set. These were meant to receive TV broadcasts for students during the day and for the general population during the evening. Our idea was that landlocked Malawi as one of the most densely populated countries of Africa, yet with a low per capita income and a generally low educational level, was in need of an educationally oriented TV program. In the long run, the country needed to capitalize on its human resource base and use it for its national development. While the country had invested wisely since independence in raising the educational level, it was not enough. Many of these educated young people preferred to migrate to other countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana, where they could earn higher salaries and enjoy greater personal freedom.

While their remittances improved rural household incomes, their absence nevertheless was a great impediment to Malawi's development. The country continued to have a deficit of well-trained manpower and had still a fairly high illiteracy rate, in particular among rural women. A few years later the situation got even worse. Many Malawians who had lived and worked abroad returned because they were infected with HIV, and as soon as host countries found out about the

infections they did not renew the visas and resident permits for these migrants. For the Malawian communities, the costs of the migration began to exceed the benefits. They lost the remittances and they had to care for the sick and dying.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic

In the late 1980s, the HIV/AIDS epidemic began to show its devastating impact. Yet, the country was in total denial of the threat, although the first HIV case was diagnosed in 1985. While WHO sent one mission after the other to sensitize the government to the looming public health crisis, nobody dared to speak about it openly. Even when South Africa began to test Malawian workers in Malawi who wanted to return to work in the mines after a home visit, and refused visas to those who had tested positive for the virus, the government remained inactive. Rumors said that the Malawian army and police force had a prevalence rate of up to 65 percent. Still the government did nothing. We in the UN system organizations and other donors began to adjust our programs in order to tackle the HIV/AIDS threat, but it was a difficult uphill struggle. Then, an opportunity arose which finally made it possible for me to raise the issue at the highest level.

Every year the permanent secretaries came together in a retreat. In April 1989, they invited the representative of the World Bank and me in my capacity as UN resident coordinator to their meeting. As I was driving to the venue, I was not sure what I was going to say, but as I saw the agenda of the meeting and again did not find any reference to HIV/AIDS, I on the spur of the moment challenged this assembly of the senior most civil servants in the country. I said that while I fully understood why they were discussing the issues on their agenda, I could not for the life of me understand why they were not addressing the AIDS epidemic. Many of their social and economic policies would be affected by this epidemic for years to come, even if the spread of the virus could be stopped in the near future. This was highly unlikely given the silence in the country about it, and the wrong and misleading information which was circulating as a result of such official silence.⁷

⁷ At the time, people still believed that the virus was spread through mosquitoes and that an infusion made from the bark of a particular local tree could cure people from the effects of the virus.

During the following coffee break, the Secretary for Health, who was also the personal physician of the President, approached me and in a somewhat irritated tone asked me why I had brought up AIDS. I responded: “Dr. Ntaba, you know the numbers better than I do, as you are working with WHO on those for years now. How can you not inform your fellow permanent secretaries of the situation?”

As a result of my intervention, the agenda was changed. The Health Secretary gave a full briefing to his colleagues, many of whom were indeed not aware of the situation. By then, they all had buried many a friend, relative or neighbor who had succumbed to the disease. But somehow they were reluctant to put one and one together. As the report of the meeting now had to cover the subject and went up to the President for his information and consideration, he was finally made aware of the upcoming crisis. Later on I was told that he had written on the margins of the report, that he wanted all to be done to stop the epidemic. Well, such political instructions came too late. Malawi continued to suffer terribly and lost many of its best and brightest to HIV/AIDS.⁸ But at least we had succeeded in having HIV/AIDS on the public development agenda, and could begin to make provisions in our programs for the fight against the epidemic.

By the beginning of 1990, it was apparent that the AIDS epidemic was changing the demographic situation dramatically. Although the government was no longer denying the threat, they disagreed on how to face it. At the time, the virus was mostly transmitted through hetero-sexual contact. The official sexual morality of the country did not allow promiscuity. The real situation was far from it. Officials, who travelled a lot or worked away from their families, such as politicians, military and police officers were having frequent sexual contact with unknown partners. The Malawians who worked as miners in South Africa were only allowed back to South Africa if they had tested negative to the virus. Half of them did not and thus remained infected in Malawi spreading the virus even to the remotest rural areas.

⁸ At the time that I write this account, Malawi has over a million AIDS orphans, and its population growth has gone down from around 3 percent p.a. in the 1980s to under 1 percent in 2000. The population growth rate is now higher again. Newborn babies of HIV positive mothers can be treated relatively easily and effectively.

It was painful to watch how development gains began to be eroded, while no remedy was in sight. We in the UN system did as much as we could. We based our interventions on knowledge which was very sketchy at the time. We commissioned theatre plays which would tour the country, we sponsored radio talk shows to reach as many people with messages on how they could protect themselves, and we again organized workshops for traditional healers, this time to convince them that there was no cure against this virus and that they should not say otherwise. We also re-oriented the family planning projects funded by UNFPA. For the first time, demographers factored into their projections the impact of AIDS and predicted that by 2000, the population growth rate from currently around 3 percent would fall to below 1 percent (a prediction which came unfortunately true). The family planning messages therefore shifted from child spacing and birth control to messages about safe sex. These were not easy shifts to make given the prevalent official “Victorian” morality. But at the time, these were the only means at our disposal.

I was devastated to hear, read and see several Malawian counterparts die within a short span of time. Several young professionals we had sent on a fellowship for training abroad came back to succumb to the disease. We were struggling whether we should test fellowship candidates before we gave our approval for their departure. Funds were scarce, and if the candidate would become sick, the investment would be lost. Yet, making it a requirement was a severe infringement on their personal life. In the end, we opted for voluntary testing, but only few underwent the test, and so the country lost in more than one way, when the trainees were HIV/AIDS positive without either admitting it or refusing to know it. To this day, Malawi (like most African countries) has not won the fight against AIDS.

Foreign policy complications

Carrying out my assignment in Malawi had other complications because of the unusual foreign policy of the government. Not only did the country have diplomatic relations with South Africa, it also still maintained ties with Taiwan rather than with the People’s Republic of China. After Beijing assumed its seat in the UN in 1972 and

replaced Taiwan, most other countries in the world had changed their recognition, not so Malawi.⁹

It is general practice that a newly arriving resident representative would pay a courtesy visit to other heads of diplomatic missions. Malawi at the time had 9 resident ambassadors. Therefore, it would not be difficult to pay a courtesy visit to each of them. However, two of the nine posed a real problem to me, namely the ambassador of South Africa (a country still under UN sanctions because of its apartheid policy) and the ambassador of Taiwan (a country no longer recognized as a UN member state). During the course of some of my visits, I had learned that the South African ambassador was about to leave. I therefore postponed my call on him waiting for his successor to arrive and leaving the decision to him whether he wanted to call on me or not. The incoming ambassador decided to call on me. During his visit he asked me whether as the UN we would work with South African companies if the Malawian government requested so. I replied if he could indicate to us a South African company owned and operated by black South African businessmen or -women, I would be quite willing to consider such a request favorably. Many months later, the ambassador told me that he was so impressed by my response that he did not ask any of the other questions he had in store for me. As he belonged to the liberal camp of the white South Africans we actually became friends. In a small diplomatic community of only nine resident ambassadors with frequent meetings during official government functions, it was certainly a welcome development.¹⁰

Trickier was the question of how to greet the ambassador of Taiwan. The UN only recognized the People's Republic of China as its member state and as the representative of the Chinese people; I therefore could not call on him as the ambassador of his government. But he also was the dean of the diplomatic corps. I thus decided to call on him last, making it very clear that I was greeting him as the dean and

⁹ Only in 2008 did Malawi establish diplomatic relations with Beijing and downgraded its recognition of Taiwan.

¹⁰ In the spring of 1990 I travelled by car with my colleague who served in Botswana from Swaziland to Johannesburg. When we stopped for the night in Middlebury/Transvaal, not only had the hotel accommodation for our black African driver, in the dining room a black family was having dinner without anyone paying any particular attention. Quite obviously, the apartheid system was slowly disintegrating and a few months later, the South African government stunned the world by releasing Nelson Mandela from prison.

not as the ambassador of his government. He understood and we developed a good professional relationship, as Taiwan had several very successful development projects in Malawi.

A difficult start

The first few weeks in Malawi were horrible. I was on totally new territory and constantly fearing to make mistakes. While people were friendly and helpful, I was not sure whose assistance I could accept and not be asked later for unwarranted favors. The contradictions in the country were manifold, and I was not always sure where I would come out on many issues and how to speak about these issues publicly. Yet, as the head of the office and the UN team I had to signal the direction the UN was to follow. I also was aware, rightly or wrongly, that I still was observed closely by colleagues at Headquarters, some wanting me to succeed, others to see me fail. It was a time, where outwardly all was well and going smoothly, but inwardly I felt like in a maze without knowing which was the way out. I thus kept moving cautiously, always on my guard, never quite feeling at ease and at home. Malawians are by and large very humble and shy, hardworking and minding their own. It was therefore not easy to make contact with them. The foreign community was very small, and did not offer many opportunities to socialize except for the official functions. Lilongwe was a village filled with gossip and rumors which were sometimes correct, sometimes not. In order to avoid any misrepresentations, which might complicate my life and work, I stayed mostly to myself, working long hours, reading professionally and for leisure, swimming and going on long walks when I was in Zomba or on other outings. It was a comfortable, busy, but extremely lonely time, probably the time I was most isolated from a circle of friends and acquaintances. Looking back, I am not certain that I needed to restrict my social life as much as I did. But at the time it appeared the best choice in order to succeed in this assignment.

My very first official function outside of Lilongwe was the inauguration of a bridge in central Malawi, which was connecting two villages across a small river. During the rainy season this river could become an insurmountable obstacle, causing the villagers to make a long detour of several hours. The design of the bridge was based on a similar bridge in Honduras, and the villagers were not only relieved to have

improved access to and from their village, but they were also proud of this bridge having a replica in a far away country. They had participated in constructing through voluntary labor. UNDP through its Capital Development Fund had provided the material (iron beams and stones) and through a technical assistance project, the necessary engineering supervision.

The tribal tradition in central Malawi was still matriarchal, and accordingly the chief of the village was an elderly woman. She was so surprised and pleased that the UN was represented by a woman that she came across the village square and greeted me with exuberance, speaking rapidly in her own language of which I did not understand a word and touching my arms and embracing me warmly. If until then I had had any doubts about accepting this assignment, the encounter with this local female politician and her joy at welcoming another official woman to this celebration, made me glad that I was there. On several other occasions during my field assignments, I encountered similar reactions from local people, giving credence to the notion that the UN's advocacy and commitment to enhance the participation of women in decision-making through elected office or in other senior positions could best be achieved by the UN also having women in senior positions.

Influencing macro-economic policies

Malawi is one of the poorest countries according to the international ranking criteria of the World Bank. But it gains on the Human Development Index on average nine positions each year.¹¹ It is a country which invested heavily in its social infrastructure from its own and foreign resources. It is land-locked, and during the years that I was there most direct link to the sea, the port of Beira on the Mozambican coast, was blocked by the civil war in Mozambique. The closure of this route caused Malawi much higher transport costs for its export crops, which had either to be flown out or taken via Tanzania to sea harbors.

Although the tea is of superb quality, it did not fetch a good price for the producers, because of the relatively high transportation costs, but

¹¹ The HDI is a composite index. It measures three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. For a detailed definition see Human Development Report 2004, Technical Note # 1.

also because of its small quantities. The big tea companies were mostly using it to upgrade the quality of the tea from other countries which was sold in tea bags. I regularly urged the representatives of the Malawi tea growers to establish for their excellent product a niche market and to undertake the marketing in the European markets directly. But neither the Smallholder Tea Growers Association, nor the representatives of the estate growers reacted to my advocacy positively. Clearly, the international structure for selling and marketing tea was too well-established for a relatively small producer community to break free from it.

But through such contacts with the producers of export commodities, I also learned a thing or two about the detrimental influence which the macro-economic advice of the IMF had on the economic performance of Malawi. During the first few months of my assignment, I was told that each year the business community dreaded the arrival of the annual IMF mission which reviewed the economic indicators. During the second year of my assignment, I could witness that what I was told was correct. As soon as the mission was planned and speculations started to circulate about its dates, imported goods began to disappear in the shops. Traders were keeping them in their storerooms under lock and key. The reason was that the IMF missions came and invariably recommended a devaluation of the Malawi currency, the Kwacha. This made export goods cheaper, but imports more expensive. Therefore, traders wanted to hoard imported items and sell them after they knew the rate of devaluation with a similar price increase so that they could replenish their stocks without any loss to themselves. As Malawi was importing a great variety of items of daily necessity within weeks, such price increases would make themselves felt for locally produced items, too. Given the dependence of the Malawi economy on imports, a devaluation of the local currency resulted sooner rather than later in price increases and a rise in living costs.

The government had the practice to debrief the IMF mission with the diplomatic community present. During the first meeting I attended, I raised the issue of devaluation and local price increases, only to be dismissed by the head of the IMF mission that this was of marginal importance to the macro-economic performance of the country. The next year, I employed a different tactic. Even before I had heard about

the upcoming IMF mission, I knew they were arriving, because toilet paper and similar items were no longer available in the shops in Lilongwe from one day to the other. I called the Ministry of Finance and got confirmation and the exact dates for the mission. UNDP was supporting the national planning system and we had a young American economist assigned to this project. I called him into my office and asked him, what he thought about the IMF advice and whether he had any idea what one could do about its detrimental impact on the local economy. He was evasive and not very eager to get involved. Besides, he did not want to act solely on my request, but wanted to have permission from his employing UN organization to take on this extra task.

It so happened that shortly after my inconclusive meeting with the expert, which UNDP was funding, his technical supervising officer from New York was visiting. So I told him that I wanted the expert to do something which would counteract the IMF advice. Failing this, I would have to think twice about extending the project, the real reason why he had come. Then for a few days I heard nothing, until I met with the permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance, who thanked me for having made available our young economist as part of the government team which would be negotiating with the IMF. In response I just wished him good luck.

Then came the habitual debriefing, and the mission leader opened the meeting with a bombshell. He told us that they had decided not to recommend a devaluation of the local currency, because of the negative impact on consumer prices. I was mightily pleased, but did not have a clue of what had happened. So I went back to the permanent secretary the next day and asked him how the IMF had reached their unusual decision. He chuckled and told me the following: our young economist had been asked by the government to prepare the updates of the economic indicators which the IMF mission had requested. Instead of showing export producer prices, he showed domestic consumer prices. He thus showed how much Malawi had to pay more for imports rather than to focus on the gains through lower export prices. This action by our economist showing the negative domestic effects of devaluating the Malawian currency took the mission by surprise and convinced them not to make their usual recommendation.

Everybody in the country heaved a sigh of relief. Goods reappea-

red in the shops at their old price level, more were imported, and the national customs authority collected more import duties than in previous years, which in turn led to higher public revenues and a slight reduction in the budget deficit. When the Minister of Finance presented his budget to Parliament, he received a lot of praise and he was basking in this approval by his fellow politicians. He also was a grateful person. A few weeks later I had to go and ask him for the payment of Malawi's voluntary contribution to UNDP. Not only did he initiate the prompt payment, which was unusual, he also informed me that Malawi was going to increase its contribution to UNDP, which was even more unusual, and I had not even asked for such an increase. Now, even UNDP Headquarters learned about Malawi's improved public revenue situation, and asked me how I had managed to convince the government to increase their contribution. I am not sure they believed my explanation.

Influencing social policies

In a certain way, I was doing macro-economic advocacy not as part of our program, but as a sideline. Our programs had a much more social orientation, e.g. poverty alleviation, improvements in primary school education, and modernization of rural housing. But even on those aspects we crossed swords with the IMF and the World Bank more than once.

Upon the advice of the World Bank, the government imposed school fees for primary school education. The effects were that children from poor families could either not attend school or only intermittently, i.e. when parents had the money to pay the fees. In all families, parents gave preference to the education of their boys, leaving many girls without any formal education. Those who were able to attend were nevertheless the first to leave when parents either could no longer pay or had other demands on their daughters in their home and business or wanted to marry them off at age 13 or 14.

In many meetings I urged the government to revise their policy and to abolish school fees. I quoted World Bank studies from Asian countries which stated that the payback to society as a whole was highest for a universal six year primary education. These studies had found that universal basic literacy was the surest ticket to sustainable eco-

conomic growth, innovation in agricultural production and the establishment of local industries and services. The government officials listened carefully and politely but did not want to oppose the World Bank. At the time they were negotiating a sizeable loan for improving the conditions of the primary school system, and they did not want to complicate or endanger these negotiations. In those days, African officials did not yet realize that the money they borrowed from the World Bank was to serve the best interest of the country as they had defined them. They let themselves be held hostage to the prevailing views at the World Bank. What a huge difference to China, where officials would never accept a foreign view unless they were convinced that it was useful to them.

The World Bank staff was divided, the technical staff, i.e. the educational specialists, agreed with me, but said that their economists would not clear such a policy shift. In those days, the orthodoxy of *the structural adjustment* concept reigned supreme in the World Bank. The consequences on the ground were disastrous: low enrolment, especially of girls, and high dropout rates.

More girls to be educated

Eventually, I took an initiative in support of my advocacy, which nobody had thought of before. Under our primary education project I opened a budget line for individual scholarships. For three years, each year UNDP funded a full scholarship, covering the annual cost of school fees, school uniform, books and meals for two girls at about 10 percent of all primary schools in Malawi. The total estimated cost per annum was roughly \$ 28,000. We agreed with the Ministry of Education on the selection criteria both of the schools as well as the potential beneficiaries and then I handed the permanent Secretary for Education a check in a public ceremony which was widely reported in the local radio and newspapers. The latter was important so that as wide as possible an audience would know about this scheme, and hopefully other sponsors would follow suit and a certain public control over the use of these funds would be secured.

The obstacles to get this initiative on the road even within UNDP were manifold. Some questioned whether this was a proper use of UNDP funds. This was hard to understand as we sent every year 100s

of Malawians with individual scholarships for studies abroad. Others did not know how we would budget and account for these funds. Again, we had very clear budgeting and accounting procedures in place for the use of such training funds. A third group was ambivalent about the implied criticism of the World Bank/government educational policy. Well, here the delegated authority of a resident representative came handy. I could approve the scheme locally. Because of its innovative feature I informed Headquarters, but I did not need their approval. The result was resounding silence from the regional bureau in New York on this initiative. For good measure I also sent a message to the Administrator Bill Draper directly, and word came back via his chief of staff, great initiative, go ahead.

After one year, I recruited an evaluator and sent her to all regions for an assessment of the impact of this scheme in at least five schools in each region apart from inspecting the records which the Ministry of Education kept. The feedback was wonderful. Initially, the staff in the ministry had not been too enthusiastic about this scheme, as it meant a lot of extra work to them for little money. But over time they caught on, as this little money was putting them in contact with school heads in a new way: they had something to give, small as it was, and they could discuss professionally with these principals about the pros and cons of existing educational policies. Some school heads were questioning the rationale for selecting only girls, after all there were many boys, too, who would qualify under most of the established criteria. I was told that this criticism sparked a lively debate among the primary school educators about the need and necessity to recruit and retain the girls of primary school age in school. I was thrilled when I heard this. No amount of speeches, lectures, letters and memos from us could have possibly produced a better result.

Overall, we had only two dropouts from among the 400 girls who benefitted from this scholarship scheme. Most parents got the message, namely that it was important to educate the girls as well and that education paid. Many years later, school fees were finally abolished, and the enrolment of girls improved greatly. Malawian friends told me that the above initiative somehow became a turning point in the government's thinking and that ever since we had launched this initiative they were disagreeing with the World Bank on the question

of school fees. Regrettably by then, the AIDS epidemic was challenging the educational system in new and unprecedented ways. Many Malawian teachers died of AIDS during the 1990s, and the total number of local teachers surviving was so small that Malawi had to revert back to recruiting international and national volunteers, who had to undergo crash teacher training programs in order to keep its primary school system running.

Feeling comfortable at last

By the time I initiated this innovative, yet commonsense assistance to primary schoolgirls I had finally found my emotional balance in Malawi. I felt less boxed in, many people knew me and even, when they disagreed with my views, they appreciated my commitment to Malawi's development. Outside Lilongwe, I had made a few personal friends among foreign experts and local expatriate residents where I could relax on weekends without fear of every word I uttered to be passed around and every action I took to be commented on. Several friends from Germany and the US came to visit and we discovered together the beauty of this mostly unknown country. I had lived in Kenya, a very popular tourist destination, and in West Africa, similarly visited by many European tourists, and yet, Malawi which exceeded in many ways the natural beauty of these countries and its cultural wealth and authenticity was unknown. Of course, I did not want to see herds of package tourists arrive in the country and destroying what was there, but one or the other study group could easily have been organized similar to the ones which were flooding China at the time.

When I travelled through various parts of Malawi with friends and family members, we greatly enjoyed the existing tourist infrastructure, which often dated back to the colonial times. They were old-fashioned, but impeccably maintained. The hotels were small facilities for visiting families; by now most of these family tourists came from South Africa and other countries in the sub-region. Safaris were exclusively photo-Safaris, and hotels along the lakeshore warned about leaving bungalows at night lest one wanted to encounter a hippo or other wild animals. Villagers told me more than once very angrily about the elephants and hippos which trampled through their fields and destroyed their crops.

One of the most beautiful trips I made was to the north of Malawi. With my personal car I drove with a friend visiting from New York to Nyika plateau. In many ways the grasslands of the plateau which rises to an altitude of 2,500 meters resemble the Scottish highlands. In several places the national tourist organization managed groups of cozy huts, which had been built by British settlers way back when they came here to hunt. To this day local employees helped in the evening with the lighting of a fire in the fireplace and were cooking a meal with the ingredients one had to bring. It was old-fashioned, but also very pleasant and during a starry night outright romantic.

The next morning after our arrival, I drove with my friend towards the escarpment on the upper rim of the Rift Valley. I had heard in Lilongwe that from the top one could look down into the valley where large herds of elephants were moving about. We were alone and decided to leave the car, as we could see nearly nothing. The grass, which at that time of the year was reaching above our heads, was blocking our view. We started to walk with the help of a map towards a cliff which we assumed would give us an unencumbered view down. When we had walked single file for a while along a small path, I noticed animal droppings and became aware that the wind was blowing from us towards a small forested area. It was known that leopards and lions were in this part of the plateau, and we became very quiet. We both had some Africa experience, and became scared. What if a lion would get our scent? Would the animal attack? We decided to turn back and leave the elephants where they were.

On that same trip we also visited the mission station of Livingstonia high above Lake Malawi, which was built by the Free Church of Scotland to which Dr. Livingstone had belonged.¹² For decades, the station provided schooling and medical services to the African population in this part of the country. Many Malawians from the north had received their first schooling here, and had moved on to university studies in the UK and other overseas countries. During the fight for independence, the colonial administration had ordered all expatriates to leave the rural areas. But the doctors, nurses and teachers of Livingstonia defied

¹² Dr. David Livingstone had mounted his exploratory travels on the African continent from areas which are in today's Malawi. Even his famous meeting with the American explorer Stanley had occurred near Lake Malawi.

the order. When British airplanes were circling above the station, the missionaries wrote a quote from the Bible with pebbles into the sand signaling that they were staying and continuing with their work. The Africans fighting for independence and the post colonial government thanked these forthright missionaries by giving them protection and support so that they could carry on with their work.

Driving down the escarpment from the station to the lakeshore on a steep, winding road which the missionaries had built with zeal and determination still needed perseverance and courage. The car slid down on the sandy ground rather than drove. But we made it, and continued along the lake back towards Lilongwe. The people we met on our way were friendly, hospitable and helpful. The villages were spic and span, and the fields immaculately planted and maintained. Dr. Banda's personal commitment to modernize the country through hard work, and the response of Malawi's peasants was visible everywhere. In the international rankings, Malawi continued to be one of the poorest countries, but GDP per capita calculated at constant prices of 1964, the time of gaining independence, showed the growth and increase in wealth the country had achieved. Solid social policies and continuing traditions of the extended family had distributed such wealth fairly evenly. Even in the remotest villages people were well clad, and had a few modern amenities to share with other members of the family such as a bicycle or a radio. In between harvest and planting time, villagers relaxed and celebrated in the evenings in one or the other village. At night one could hear their tam tams and see their bonfires from far away.

While the north was far from Lilongwe, other stunningly beautiful places were more easily within reach, such as Zomba plateau, a reforested area at an altitude of 2,000 meters and further down the Rift Valley, the foothills of Mount Mulanje, only an hour's drive away from Blantyre. Whenever I could, I visited one or the other place when I went down to Blantyre, where I often had to attend to official duties. In Zomba, on the way to Blantyre, I would make a stopover and drive up the mountain to the Kuchawe Inn, have a meal and then sent the driver and car ahead, while I hiked down to town, before continuing on to Lilongwe.

Whenever possible I would buy potatoes (an Irish variety) and strawberries, which the forest workers were growing in their spare

time and the wives and daughters were selling near the rest house. They were the tastiest potatoes and strawberries in the world. If I did not go to Zomba, I would visit the tea estates around Mount Mulanje, a massive mountain range rising to 3,000 meters. As one approached the mountain leaving the hustle and bustle of Blantyre behind, one would drive for many kilometers through well-groomed tea plantations which hugged the undulating hills like a green carpet. It was a wonderful sight to behold! Occasionally, I would stay overnight with foreign experts working in Zomba or with English tea planters whose families had lived in Malawi for generations. During these visits I made my peace with my life in Malawi and I was grateful that at least by outward appearance Malawi was the exception to the rule in post-colonial Africa. The country was stable, the economy grew and people had enough to eat. Europeans and other expatriates who were willing to integrate, who paid their taxes and respected the political authorities could farm or pursue other businesses without too many difficulties.

Going to the lake, the other exceptional natural beauty of Malawi was less attractive. Although the expanse of this third largest lake on the African continent, 580 km long and in many places 10–20 km wide, is an enormous body of water with lovely hilly shores, yet it only offered recreational access in a few places. The water near the shore was too stagnant and hence infested with bacteria which cause bilharzias, or there were other risks such as hippos, which in the water were very fast, and had even along an authorized beach near Salima killed a tourist. Still, Club Makokola near Mangochi was a hotel with a well-laid-out beach, clean water and roomy huts with protection against the all-pervasive mosquitoes. Driving down the escarpment from the Dedza area towards the lake was a particularly beautiful ride. Many residents and visitors did not take this road, as it was in poor condition. But I loved it, because it offered magnificent views over the lake and the other shore in Mozambique. This road also took us past a Catholic mission station, where local wood carvers were producing statues and reliefs depicting African scenes and rural life. Some of the relief panels reminded me of the medieval picture panels in German cathedrals which the priests had used to explain biblical stories to their illiterate community members.

Fragile peacefulness

Nevertheless, there always was a sense that the foundations of such peaceful development were masking many problems and social tensions. Hunger and starvation occurred every year in one or the other part of the country, when the rains had failed. People in the rural areas would only survive on a very slim diet.

In 1987/8, many buildings owned or rented by local Asian businessmen in Blantyre and other Malawian towns were identified for demolition by the respective City Councils. The selected buildings were marked with a red sign for all to see. The action sent shivers down my spine, as it reminded me of the singling out and destruction of Jewish shops during Nazi Germany. It took me a lot of my will power and efforts to investigate the causes for this action and to go beyond the gossip and rumors which were spreading like a bushfire. What motivated this drastic action was that Malawi being committed to the market economy was also counting on the richer segments of the population to invest into the development of the country. The Asian minority in Malawi was making handsome profits from their trading businesses, but was investing very little of these gains in the country. City Councils wanted to force these businessmen to invest in the construction of new buildings and to renew the urban infrastructure. The move proved somewhat successful in the years to come, but it created a whole set of new problems. Many of these businessmen did not renew existing buildings, but invested in Lilongwe, often obtaining permission to build on land which previously had been used as public recreational space.

Most disturbing, however, was the fact that we heard that persons, mostly native Malawians, had been arrested and remained in prison without charges brought against them. Often their families only learned about the whereabouts of these prisoners after weeks or months.¹³

The local press was highly selective in what they would report on, and they would always report in positive tones about Malawian events. The President and his actions often made the headlines. I was used to such a “glorifying reporting style” from China, but in a big country like China the press was by no means as important as the news media

¹³ I shall explain later what contributed to this unjust and unlawful situation.

were in a small country like Malawi, where it was difficult to receive verifiable news by any other means than the local newspaper and the national radio. TV did not exist at the time, and the Internet had not yet arrived.

Improved rural housing

From among the 75 projects we had ongoing, one project interested me especially. This project dealt with improving rural housing conditions. It was funded by a sub-organization of UNDP, the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF). This Fund provided grant assistance for the development of mostly rural infrastructure, which would have an immediate and direct beneficial impact on economic development in the area and they provided loans for small businessmen, who otherwise would not have access to banking services. The Fund aimed to complement UNDP technical assistance which was directed towards the development of small entrepreneurs and businesses in Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

When I arrived in Malawi I inherited this CDF project which had established a dozen centers throughout Malawi. In these centers, rural housing materials were produced from local raw materials, which, however, were more durable than the traditional mud bricks. The centers also extended small loans to prospective home owners willing to employ these new building materials and housing designs, as the houses were initially more expensive than those using traditional building methods. In the long run, the new houses were cheaper, as they needed less maintenance and they were more durable. Thus, households could normally repay these loans over the agreed time.

Furthermore, the centers also trained local businessmen in the production, use and marketing of these materials and gave them start up loans for setting up their businesses. Altogether, the project provided a comprehensive package. It also was a worthwhile effort as it addressed the housing needs in densely populated areas, where the traditional building materials increasingly were in short supply. Besides, the design of the houses were environmentally sound, healthy for the inhabitants and yet affordable to the vast majority of rural households. But when I made a first round in several centers, I found to my surprise that they were languishing. Materials piled up, loan repayments

were only slowly coming in, and the number of houses built by local entrepreneurs was small and the construction took an inordinate long time to be completed.

One reason for the slow takeoff was a cultural tradition which the original team of expatriate experts had not thought of, and their Malawian counterparts did not know how to overcome. It was the tradition in rural Malawi that houses, in which somebody had died, had to be abandoned and left to fall into ruins. Within a short span of time, the walls and thatched roofs were decaying and after a few months only a heap of red earth remained, which could then be used for the construction of a new hut. The new houses were designed to be longer lasting, and they were roomier to accommodate whole families. After the death of one family member the other inhabitants were expected to stay. Many Malawians were afraid of violating the tradition. Therefore, in particular older rural people, who often had the money for such a new house, did not warm to the new design.

We discussed with the ministry in charge what could be done. We assumed that in urban areas the same problem must exist, and we enquired from the national authorities, what had been the solution. Yes, the national civil servants said, but in urban areas most people did not hold the same belief, therefore the problem did not exist in the same way. Hence, the urban experience was not particularly helpful. Eventually, we organized workshops for local leaders, including traditional healers and medicinemen to have them discuss the issues. They concluded that a ceremony could “clean” the houses of evil spirits and possible remnants of infectious diseases, and then they could be occupied by other tenants. Malawi being a small country, the news of this conclusion spread quickly, and applications at our centers jumped in numbers.

Weaknesses in project design

The other problem, in principle more easily to solve, turned out to be much more difficult to address. The original design did not foresee the inclusion of a latrine, in spite of the fact that UNCDF was supporting through another project the wider acceptance of pit latrines in villages. It became close to impossible to align the two projects, as they were managed by two different ministries with separate teams, loan schemes, work plans and budgets. Eventually, we had the rural

housing scheme project buy services and the latrines from the other project, and offered two housing types and two types of housing loans, one with and one without the construction of a latrine.

The loan funds were meant to revolve so that the initial UN endowment would be sufficient for the financing of the construction of houses over a period of time way beyond the duration of the project. But all records showed that the funds would be exhausted before the end of the project. Everybody whom I asked believed that this was caused by the fact, that repayments were not coming back as they were planned. However, the records showed, that loan takers were repaying their debt, although not as quickly as the project team had assumed. When we looked into this aspect, it became very apparent that people repaid according to their cash flow. This fact was determined by the seasonal income derived from agricultural production. I requested the financial experts of the companion UNDP technical assistance project to build the projections of the revolving fund according to the more realistic repayment schedule of the loan takers. From that it was clear that the endowment might last until the end of the project, but not beyond, as originally foreseen. For that to happen and to anticipate a growth element due to the encouraging greater demand for small loans, also on the side of the construction enterprises, we needed to have 8 million US dollars instead of the existing 2 million. It was not possible during my assignment to raise these additional funds, leaving the project, which mutated very rapidly into a national program, to a somewhat uncertain future. One more example of a successful idea and project, but without the financial inputs required to make both sustainable.

First brush with corruption

In the context of this project, I also had my first brush with corruption by a national counterpart. In general, the civil service under President Kamuzu Banda was remarkably well-qualified, diligent and resistant to corruptive practices. The political leadership was another matter, but President Banda had emulated very successfully the practices of the British civil service, and it was, in fact, a joy to work with these officials. They owned farms, urban houses and businesses, but they were very conscientious and respected that these had to be separated from

their official duties. Mostly during those years, civil servants used these businesses to take care of their extended families and to ensure against a sudden hardship and for their old age. In those years, the normal retirement age for government officials was 55, and, of course, without a second source of income they would be in dire economic straits.

As the rural housing project took off, rumors reached me that the National Project Director,¹⁴ who was also a senior official in the ministry, was running several of the construction enterprises, availing his businesses in more than one location of the loans which the project made available. When I asked the international experts what we should and could do about the situation, they replied that nothing could be done as this person was well-connected to the highest level in the government. I was disappointed by their response, but kept the matter under review.

Eventually came the time of the annual review of the project. I tried to attend as many of these project reviews as possible, and I certainly intended to participate in this one. Before the meeting I sent word to the government that I wanted the permanent secretary to also participate in the meeting. This was an unusual request, but by that time I was sufficiently known that I must have my reasons for this request. We conducted the meeting according to the established agenda with the National Project Director and all the international experts in attendance. Everybody was pleased with the progress, and wished to raise more funds for the loan schemes. Under the agenda item “any other business”, I then asked for a closed session with only the permanent secretary, the UNDP program officer, me and one junior official from the Ministry of Finance in the room. All others were to be excused from the meeting. The permanent secretary was somewhat surprised, but acceded to my request. I then made a statement saying that I wanted to raise a matter concerning the National Project Director (NPD). Although it was no skin of my nose, the UN would consider it highly questionable that the NPD was directly and personally

¹⁴ All UNDP projects were to have a national project director and a chief technical adviser from among the international expert team. The National Project Director was to assume the overall management, and ensure that the project was well integrated into the national plans and work programs, while the Chief Technical Advisor was to ensure technical soundness of project interventions and adherence to UNDP's rules and procedures in their execution. There was tension between these two, but by and large the system worked well, because of the qualifications and competencies of the Malawian civil servants.

benefiting from the project through his businesses. While we had no problem with him being a businessman, as this was general practice in the country, we nevertheless found it detrimental to the reputation of the project and the whole program that he was so actively involved in a dual capacity. I concluded by saying that I would leave the matter in the hands of the government to deal with. The permanent secretary thanked me for my statement and we closed the meeting.

After the meeting the international experts were pumping me to tell them what had transpired during the closed session. I only told them that I had raised the business engagement of the NPD in the program. However, a few weeks afterwards, we learned that the NPD had been relieved of his functions, and had left the civil service in order to attend full-time to his businesses.

I was, of course, curious to learn what had happened on the national side and in my next informal meeting with the Secretary to the President and Cabinet I asked what had led to this decision. He laughed and said that I had left it to them to settle the matter. So they had. Was I not satisfied? I replied by thanking the government for a decision which clearly made it much easier for UNDP to continue to be associated with the program. He then shared with me what had occurred internally. He told me that the process had been quite difficult, but that in the end the President himself had ruled that the official either had to suspend his business or resign from the civil service. Obviously, he had chosen the second option.

Feeling comfortable professionally

By then I was feeling professionally comfortable in Malawi. I had changed the deputy resident representative, as the former one increasingly became disenchanted with my success, and it was no longer clear whether he was loyal to me. Staff in the office felt the tension and were not sure whether they should side with the deputy (an African) or with me (a European woman). I therefore asked the regional bureau to plan for a reassignment of the incumbent deputy, but insisted that his replacement should be an African, too. The bureau in New York agreed, and the change was made towards the end of 1988. The program was running well; it had grown and expanded into many areas. We had restructured our portfolio of projects in such a way that it was

most suitably supporting ongoing national efforts. Absorptive capacity was low; therefore most projects were much smaller than their predecessors for the simple reason that I accepted much fewer long-term and expensive expatriate experts and programmed more funds for in-country training as well as fellowships for Malawians to continue their studies abroad.

We were not asked to procure expensive equipment, except for cars and office equipment. Even on those we kept the lid, and insisted on good local maintenance provisions instead.¹⁵

The above shift had come about in a curious way. Since the early 1980s, UNDP in Africa was funding and supporting the organization of NATCAP exercises.¹⁶ The World Bank was estimating that for loan programs with a structural change dimension, 40 percent of the financial resources were required for technical assistance. These were huge amounts, and it was necessary to develop approaches which would be most effective and cost-efficient to produce desired results of national capacity building and ownership.

I had convinced with great difficulties the Malawi government to organize a NATCAP exercise. They were used to UNDP being a “doer” and not as so many development partners to suggest studies, which might lead to a cooperation project or not. At the time, policy dialogue was all the rage in development cooperation and needed solid factual evidence which, more often than not, was not available. Governments in African countries got tired of these studies. Still, the government eventually relented and the exercise began.

After an initial assessment jointly carried out by national and international experts, we held a national seminar to review the results. The preliminary findings showed that Malawi needed much more foreign technical assistance than it was receiving, and that the low capacity in the national administration was a major constraint to the implementation of national policies and to the absorption of foreign funding, even when the funds had already been approved.

¹⁵ My experience with the Moroccan UNDP program came handy in this regard.

¹⁶ NATCAP stands for *National Technical Cooperation Assessment Programs*. They were organized to develop better tools and methods to plan and program as well as manage technical assistance in African countries.

Preserving national ownership of projects

During my first year in the post, I had observed that each time a foreign expert arrived shortly thereafter his or her national counterpart would either be transferred or would go abroad for further training. The technical assistance rationale said that foreign experts should train their national counterparts on the job, and then they should leave. But if these counterparts were not available, then there was no training on the job. During the seminar I took the opportunity to confront the national participants with this observation. First they denied that this was a common occurrence. They wanted to convince me that these were isolated cases. But I insisted. After their initial hesitation, they finally began to talk and revealed that they were taking the initiative to be transferred or to get a fellowship because they could not really learn from the international experts. As national civil servants they had to observe the hierarchy and national protocol. A foreign expert had no such restrictions; they had much easier access to the minister either directly or through me. Therefore, the performance of the national officials would always be less effective and quick than the performance of their international “coaches”. While the interaction between the external expert and his national counterpart was not to work this way, I had to accept the fact that it often did.

As the funding agency, we therefore had two options either to ask the foreign experts from refraining to get involved in the national decision-making process or to reduce the number of foreign experts. Based on my previous China experience I opted for the latter solution. This in the local context was close to being revolutionary. But the results bore me out: the Malawi program became a well accepted, dynamic and fully integrated program supporting the national structure according to their needs and requirements. Other donors also benefitted from our revised approach, as their programs were processed much faster. We thus were playing the catalytic role the UN was supposed to play, pulling programs of other donors with us and influencing national policies without intruding on the decision-making process.

But not everybody was satisfied. New York became very concerned about the rapidly increasing number of projects which were all of a size that I could approve locally. They suspected that I was approving small projects to escape from the control of Headquarters. It took

many country visits to Malawi by our backstopping area officer in New York, the division chief and even the regional director and his deputy, to prove that we had chosen this approach in order to be more effective at the country level, and not for any other reason.

Local success, but against international trends

Unfortunately for us at the time, it became the prevailing view that UNDP country programs in general had too many projects, and activities should be more focused on fewer topics. From the country level the perspective was quite different. If we wanted to be respectful of the national authorities' way of operating we needed to adjust to their pace and capacity. If on the other hand we wanted to program and spent all the funds at our disposal then we had to intervene in several areas simultaneously. I therefore always felt that African countries were overfunded in terms of their capacity to absorb development assistance. If this funding was not carefully aligned with the national absorptive capacity it could become quite counterproductive and wasteful. I held a lonely view and voiced a dissenting view which did not carry very far. As I had no ambition to get involved in the international debate about delivery modalities of technical assistance, but rather to run a successful program in Malawi, I left matters where they were. But it was frustrating to always hear that Africa needed more assistance in order to economically and socially advance. In reality, it needed assistance which was more sensibly programmed and carried out.¹⁷

Another challenge: private sector development

Before I could become too comfortable in my work and life, Headquarters sent me and all other country representatives of UNDP an unusual instruction. Bill Draper, the Chief Executive of UNDP, felt that the organization was doing too little to promote private sector development. He also thought that our programs were too

¹⁷ A friend of mine from Malawi put it succinctly "From the perspective of recipient countries, technical assistance lost its meaning since the arguments for focus won the day. It has ever since been focus from the point of view of the donors. Since those days it has been lip service to national ownership and leadership. The smaller projects fitted well into national plans and programs. On the other hand, more focus and size required that the donor also had implementation units and these multiplied: in the process, national capacities were slowly eroded or frustrated. In my view this was one of the problems in Malawi."

heavy and inflexible to respond to newly arising policy requirements. He therefore asked us to organize at the country level private sector round tables to promote discussions and free-wheeling exchanges of views. These meetings were to be chaired by us, UNDP. He was giving each of us a budgetary allocation under our own discretionary authority for these round tables. He wanted us to bring together leading figures from the business community as well as the government. Fortunately in Malawi this was easy to organize. I was by then well-established enough to interest some 20 senior representatives from the business sector, the central government and some regional officials to participate. The Malawian government was at the time planning to issue an investment code for foreign direct investments. I thus proposed to take this as the topic of the first round table.

The response was good and we had all who were important and influential in the Malawian economy around the table. At the beginning, participants were shy to talk freely and to each other, but as the day went on, we arrived at a lively dialogue reaching some important conclusions on what such a code in Malawi should contain. For a small amount of money, the drafters of the required legislation in the Ministry of Industry and Trade had received many inputs and food for thought. The minister thanked me profusely afterwards. Regrettably, this round table may have contributed to hasten his dismissal from his post, as the President supposedly had found him not sufficiently dynamic.

I still had funds for another round table, but was weary of choosing another “hot” topic, lest somebody else’s career would end, too. Instead, I proposed to deal in more general terms with the question of what were the main challenges for the development of Malawi’s private sector. This time, it was not difficult to get the discussion going, and soon it touched upon a subject which was basically taboo in Malawian politics: land reform and the adjudication of land so that people owned titles to the land and could use it as collateral for a variety of investments. This time, I as chair was in the hot seat. It was well known that President Banda was opposed to a land reform and in particular to private ownership of land. He wanted all land, which had not been adjudicated during the colonial rule, to be owned by the state in keeping with the African tradition that all land belonged

to the tribe, and only rights for usage were given to individuals for a period of time. Therefore, except for the tea and tobacco plantations, which belonged to privately owned companies (of which he was in several cases a shareholder in his personal capacity), and some urban real estate, most land in Malawi was inaccessible to foreigners and not safe from the danger of sudden seizure by the government. Needless to say, this was a major impediment to private sector development, but it also was a hot potato, and some participants got really belligerent over the issue. Eventually, I had to use the privilege of the chair and rule that the case had been made for the need of a major overhaul of the land tenure system and proposed to move on. We could not possibly solve the issue right there, and inwardly I was praying that the discussion would not hit on another hot issue. I had to assume that the secret police was represented in the meeting, and I did not want them to report to the President that the round table had mutated into a forum of opposition to his rule. I had a few days of anxiety after the meeting. But some days later one of the ministers, who had not participated in the round table, said to me that I had handled the situation well. Obviously, the round table had been subject to discussions at the highest government level beyond those who had participated in the session. I could finally relax.

In one of his public speeches following these round tables, the President made a distinction between the UN in New York and the UN at the country level, signaling that he had received favorable reports on our interventions and was satisfied with my performance. But he maintained his critical view of the UN as a whole. Several ambassadors congratulated me, and disclosed that rumors had been flying in the early months of my assignment that I was not to last in the post for very long. Obviously, the President had heard about these rumors, too, and had chosen an unusual way to squelch them.

Once more, peacefulness in Malawi was deceptive

But the peacefulness was misleading. Malawi in many ways was also a troubling place to work and live. There was first the political situation. While President Banda could be considered a benevolent dictator, who was willing to respond positively to external advice and advocacy, his rule was hard on the people. Open opposition was an absolute

no-no in Malawi. As already mentioned, people would disappear for weeks and months in prison for critical remarks on the President or his government. I cautiously broached the subject with the SPC and some other senior government officials. An easy entry into such a dialogue was the fact that the President was holding many offices at the same time. Apart from being the President of the Malawi Congress Party, which ruled the country as the only officially recognized party, he was President (for Life) of the Republic, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Agriculture, Defense, Communications and Justice respectively. Clearly this accumulation of posts meant that he would be an easy target of any dissatisfaction and criticism. He was somewhere around 90 years old, and the load he was carrying was certainly too big for him and any potential successor. The subject of his succession was in those days a subject nobody dared to raise with him openly, except for Bill Draper when he came to visit. I understand that the senior government officials had a hard time to convince President Banda, that I had not put up my visiting chief executive to raise this issue.

Following the President around the country

For all intents and purposes, Dr. Banda had styled his rule on the model of the traditional tribal chiefs, and accordingly he was hiring and firing his ministers and permanent secretaries and other senior officials at his personal discretion. They all were in fear of falling in disgrace for whatever reason, as this could end their public career from one day to the next.¹⁸ People who had direct access to him were mindful and selective in what they were telling him. He was aware of such self censorship and it was rumored that he heavily relied on reports from the secret police. True or not, he clearly had several sources of information to form his opinion, which he would share publicly in his speeches. There were many opportunities for him to speak, e.g. at the Opening of Parliament, at the launch of the agricultural planting season, on the convocation at the University of Malawi in Zomba, of which he was the Chancellor, and on National Day, to mention only

¹⁸ Fortunately, dismissed officials would not be imprisoned or their families punished as well. They could continue to pursue a career in business or in a professional freelance capacity. Often their spouses were also employed by the government, and they would continue in their posts.

a few. These events would take place in different places around the country. Like the German emperor in the early Middle Ages, President Banda had several official residences in the country and he would move from one to the other and conduct his official functions from there. Senior officials were therefore often on the road, and so was the small diplomatic corps, as we were all expected to attend these official national functions.

I came to like these functions. Not only would they give the opportunity to see the four corners of Malawi and to take the opportunity to visit some of our ongoing projects on the ground, it also was a wonderful occasion to make a lot of informal contacts with government officials and members of the diplomatic corps. Besides, it was relaxing to spend hours in the mostly pleasant climate of Malawi outdoors and watch a series of traditional dances, in which the “old man” and his first lady would invariably participate at a certain point of the performances. The protocol of these events was British, as were the military displays, the festivities were African and his speeches were a mix of repeated messages and on occasion some new policy statements.¹⁹ It thus was always good to listen carefully, as there could be surprises. He certainly took these opportunities to respond to the pressures which donor agencies were making on him and their critique of his authoritarian and autocratic rule.

I particularly liked the religious service on the eve of the National Day celebrations. It would be attended by all senior party and government officials, the diplomatic corps, civil and business leaders. The service would be conducted jointly by a Christian priest (on a rotational basis between the various denominations active in Malawi), a Muslim Imam, a Hindu preacher and Dr. Banda in his capacity as an Alderman of the Church of Scotland. Coming from Europe, where over the centuries religious rifts had led to many wars and much suffering, such ecumenical practice was inspiring. Dr. Banda having lived both in the US and the UK in his younger years knew from firsthand experience about these religious conflicts, and as President of his country

¹⁹ President Banda’s standard message was that development had to secure for every Malawian a roof which did not leak when it rained, enough food and decent clothing based on hard work. He was still promulgating a *basic needs approach to development*, which the donor community had long abandoned in favor of *structural adjustment*.

he had done an admirable job in not having such conflicts repeated in Malawi. He had been similarly discouraging tribal affiliations within the modern political setting. He succeeded where many other African countries failed. Both these initiatives survived his fall and are probably among the most valuable elements of his legacy to the country.

At one point in time, the President was provoked to explain his rule during the opening of the academic year at the National University in Zomba. He disclosed that for local elections, the Malawi Congress Party was obliged to nominate at least three candidates from which the people could elect their preferred candidate. When I checked on this statement, not only was it confirmed, in addition I learned that about 60 percent of the incumbents were not re-elected. While this was a sure sign that people were taking their voting rights seriously, it also explained why the party was not willing to allow for a similar competitive situation in case of parliamentary elections. Although for each election to the national parliament a certain number of candidates were replaced by new ones, it was a process heavily controlled from the top. In addition, about 20 percent of the parliamentary seats were filled by appointees of the President. Through these appointments he made sure that neglected groups would be represented, e.g. women, Muslims, Hindus etc. In the 18th century in Europe one would have called this an enlightened way of ruling, at the end of the 20th century, it appeared anachronistic and unsustainable.

Judicial reform as a precursor to political change

In my discussions about political reform, I focused on the needed reforms in the justice system. Malawi as other African countries had competing legal systems. There was first and foremost the African customary law tradition, then, as a legacy of the colonial rule, the British common law. In addition, Muslim and Hindu law was in practice, especially for civil affairs such as marriages, divorces, inheritance and the like. In other African countries, such as Kenya and Tanzania, the African customary and British common law had been integrated into a single system. In Malawi, the two co-existed separately. All politically motivated cases were tried according to African customary law, and in all other cases the solicitor-general had to determine which legal system should apply. As he reported directly to the minister, who was

also the President, who was also the President of the party, the determinations were only slowly made. This led to a situation that some of the cases were pending for years without a trial and the accused was languishing in prison. Malawi had not yet acceded to the two main human rights covenants.²⁰ My advocacy was therefore delicate, but also fully justified from the view point of the UN. While the Secretary-General instructed us as his country representatives only in the late 1990s to make the protection of human rights one of our main concerns, it was felt as a requirement for sustainable development already in the late 1980s, and I was determined to act on it in Malawi.

1989 and its impact on Malawi

Political developments, which occurred in 1989 in China, Germany and Eastern Europe, gave such advocacy added momentum. Admittedly, African governments were more concerned about the volume of development assistance which they could expect in future, when it became clear that Eastern Europe would attract a lot of attention and funding. Most of the additionally needed public sector funding had to come from existing development aid budgets. Donors in Africa up to 1989 were mostly concerned about the need for African governments to reform themselves in order to remain competitive in the rapidly changing international economy. But only two to three years later the donor community began to demand political reforms as a prerequisite for further development assistance.

In Malawi, the World Bank was the largest donor and their staff had a lot of clout. A newly arrived representative politicized their lending program, stopping further loan agreements until the government had given assurances that they would permit and organize multi-party elections. I was in total disagreement with such a heavy-handed approach, besides I was acutely aware that Malawi was facing a much

²⁰ For member states of the UN, which were not among the initial signatories of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, they could sign and ratify two covenants dealing with economic, social and cultural rights and political and civil rights respectively. By virtue of the fact that Malawi had only become an independent state in 1964, it had to accede to the two covenants, which it did in 1994.

bigger threat to its development in the form of HIV/AIDS and deteriorating agricultural conditions.

Malawi was encountering more frequent droughts, and the strategic grain reserve which the government had made partially available for the feeding programs of the Mozambican refugees and starving Malawians had not been fully replenished. For the first time since independence, the country was faced with widespread hunger. Introducing multi-party democracy was, quite frankly, not the first priority on many Malawians' minds, and somehow I agreed with them, as much as I wished for a more open political system and greater political freedom for Malawians.

Realizing the greater odds for Malawi's development, I worked harder than ever before, and almost lost my life over it. I spent long hours into the night reading and answering correspondence at home. The frogs from a nearby pond accompanied my work with a loud cacophonous concert, which always ended on the dot at 11 p.m. I never understood why and what caused such regular behavior, but it was a funny thing to notice.

Surviving cerebral malaria and a papal visit

Apart from being home near the frogs, the pond also produced lots of mosquitoes. Normally I was very careful to avoid from being bitten, but as I worked I forgot the usual protection. As a result, I came down with cerebral malaria in early 1990. Several expats had died, and I only survived by a stroke of luck. For weeks I had a low grade fever which came and went to which I did not pay much attention. Then I went to a regional UNDP meeting in Addis Ababa and I was feeling pretty lousy, but attributed it to the height, the stress or whatever. From Addis I flew to Germany for my home leave, and on the first day I noticed the symptoms of malaria which I had had twice before in my life. Of course, it was a weekend. But the doctor in charge of emergency service came and as he had served as a development volunteer in Africa, he prescribed anti-malaria medication without waiting for the results of the blood tests. A good thing he did: later he told me that I was about 48 hours away from the coma, from which people normally don't wake up again. As the medication took hold of the parasites,

I felt as if I had a steel reinforced jacket under my skin around my neck and under my scalp. It was a curious experience, and one I would rather not have again.

While I was convalescing in Germany, Malawi was preparing for a papal visit. Some time prior to this visit I had remarked to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs that it was curious that Pope John Paul II had been to several countries in Southern Africa, but never Malawi, although Catholics were among the Christian population the largest denomination. The next thing I heard was that the government had invited the Pope.

Preceding the visit, the local clergy was very nervous about the papal visit. While the missionary stations and churches were observing the Pope's conservative family planning policy, local priests were nevertheless counseling their parish members to visit the government clinics when they wanted advice about birth control. These priests did not want to have the Pope speak out openly against condoms and other methods which were freely available in Malawi through non-church institutions. Fortunately, the government had heard about these concerns and requested the Pope not to speak about the subject of family planning during his visit. He indeed did not mention the subject during his sermons in Malawi.

Two days before his visit I flew back from Germany to Malawi. I could barely stand on my legs, but I managed to return and to witness what was truly a historic event in this small country, which he had almost forgotten to visit.

Preparing to leave

Around this time (April/May 1990) I decided it was time to leave. On the one hand I had proven that I could handle the responsibilities of a resident representative²¹, on the other hand I was getting tired of being at odds with the rest of the donor community. The lack of support from my own organization made me feel that I was left in limbo. The repeated rumors and the gossip concerning my person, not

²¹ In recognition I had in fact received another accelerated promotion, which this time caught me by surprise.

all of which was very friendly, had worn me out. Socially, I still felt isolated and remained on my guard when I spoke to colleagues and others I met. Malawi appeared like a long tunnel which I had entered without knowing what lay ahead. I had not turned back, but had kept going. Now I saw the end of the tunnel. Three years were a reasonable period to have “endured”. I had started to like Malawi and felt a lot of empathy for the Malawians and I was professionally satisfied with the results of our program. But I was frustrated that the World Bank was making political demands which were in this shape and form not in Malawi’s best interest. In spite of all my efforts to the contrary, the World Bank prevailed because other donors agreed. Of course, I was not against more political openness and democracy in Malawi, but I was in favor of a slower pace and smaller steps than what the donor community demanded. I also did not want to be party to a development dialogue which would eventually bring much suffering to the Malawian people.²²

Late in 1989 I asked for my transfer back to New York, and applied for the post of deputy director in our department of information systems. I wanted to learn more about a technology, which in my view held a lot of promise for future development cooperation. I had struggled in vain to get an e-mail connection going in our office in Lilongwe. I felt that changes were at play outside Africa, which were leaving the continent out, and if I remained I would lose out, too. Besides, the challenges facing African societies were of a very different nature, and I felt helpless and somewhat dejected in working on those. Malawi seemed to be in a time warp. While there were many aspects I liked enormously about this country and its people, they were not enough to keep me there.

When I was offered the post I had applied for, I accepted without hesitation. In strict career terms it was a risk I took, but it was worth taking for my own physical and psychological well-being. It began to depress me that development in Malawi and many other African countries was heading in a direction, which was not of their choosing. It was even more depressing to realize that it would take a Herculean

²² Widespread hunger and starvation were the consequence of a reduced aid flow to Malawi, which faced the worst drought since independence in 1991 and 1992.

effort to rectify the situation. The world was moving on at the beginning of the 1990s, and Africa was being torn apart by old, unresolved and new challenges. All was overshadowed by the AIDS epidemic, which in Malawi was decimating the well-educated few at an alarming pace,²³ but there were the rising economic powers of Asia, there was Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union which attracted most of the global attention. What was left for Africa was civil war and economic failures.

Towards the end of my time in Malawi, I became more outspoken and in a meeting of senior government officials I berated them for not doing enough to get the country out of its economic and social fragile state. The only reactions to my outburst were thank you for caring so deeply for the country and its people.

Moving on

I left Malawi shortly before Christmas which I celebrated in Germany with my family and friends. I was quieter than usual, because this time leaving had been difficult as well as a great relief. It was difficult because for the first time in my career I felt defeated by the forces beyond my control. Whatever we did from the UN side seemed to be wiped out by other forces at play, first and foremost the devastating epidemic of AIDS rolling into the Malawian society. I had learned to love Malawi and its people. I thought they deserved better than what the future was holding in store for them. When I called on the President to bid him farewell, he was gracious in his acknowledgments of my work. He gave me a book about Malawi with a handwritten dedication “in appreciation for the great strides you have made in the UNDP programs in Malawi. We enjoyed very much having you here and we are now sorry to see you go.” I am sure other heads of mission received

²³ A few years later during a UNDP meeting I was joining at dinner the table of African colleagues, who were bemoaning the fact that donors and other partners of Africa were pulling the continent into too many directions. The only thing they wanted was time to think and work it out among them. Years later, matters had even gotten worse. When the world finally woke up to the devastating impact which AIDS had on Africa, political leaders kept donor funded assistance separate from their own programs. They quite understandably were mistrustful of donor funding which came and went not according to need, but according to policy and other considerations of parties outside Africa.

their fair share of compliments when they left. But his simple words touched me nevertheless. I also sensed that he was feeling the pressure and maybe, for the first time in his life, he was aware that this time he would not succeed.²⁴

Other farewell dinners and lunches were similarly bittersweet. The “First Lady” Mama Kadzamira handed me a letter before I met the President for my farewell visit in Blantyre in early December. In her note she said “After a term in Malawi which has shown us new and beneficial activities, we, all your friends are sorry to see you go.” I was particularly moved that she considered me a friend whose “creativity and selflessness have been a great inspiration”. The First Lady had once already hosted a tea party in my honor, to which I almost did not go, because I thought I had more important things to attend to. This time she asked her sister, Esnat Kalyati, who was the permanent Secretary for Community Services, to host a ladies lunch for me. We were approximately 12, and many of the Malawian ladies I met for the first time. They were doctors, lawyers, senior government officials. In amazement I asked them “Where have you been hiding in these years that I have been here?”

It was another example that Malawi was doing well in so many ways, but was not disclosing it to the outside world. A few years later I met Esnat in New York. After the election she no longer was a member of the national government. By then she was working in the UNDP office in Lilongwe. Again, I asked her why Malawi was so timid in showing its achievements. She thought for a moment and then said with a twinkle in her eyes. “Why are you asking me this? You know as well as I do, that Malawians are content with what they have and do. They don’t have to brag about it.” What a response in a time and age of showmanship and an all pervasive commercial PR culture.

²⁴ He did not. In 1992, he was voted out of office in an election which was open to several parties. My successor had provided UNDP assistance to ensure that the elections were organized in a fair and transparent manner, which they were.

Somehow I also felt that this may well have been the last time that I would deal intensively with Africa and its development. Africa's doors are never wide open to outsiders, and they close when one leaves the continent. And that is exactly what happened. I returned a few times to Africa on duty travels, but I never really returned. Africa was a closed chapter in my life after I had left Malawi.

I was sad and I was glad to leave for a new assignment. I was glad to return to New York, that I had left involuntarily three and a half years earlier. Although I had had a very enriching experience in Malawi, which by then I did not want to miss, I was looking forward to another round in the Big Apple.



Another development goal Low-cost Housing Instead of Slum Dwellings

5. Harnessing New Communications Technologies For Development Cooperation: New York (the Second Time) 1991 – 1998

In some ways coming back was like coming home, but then it also was a new situation. As usual in the context of a reassignment, a place to live had to be found and the move of my household goods had to be awaited. The days where I moved with a few boxes were long gone. By now I moved from one assignment to the next with furniture and many objects I had acquired in China, New York and now Malawi. I lived the life as a true nomad and became quite experienced in packing, sending and storing my personal effects.

This time, too, a friend in New York offered me to stay with her as long as I needed to. She had a lovely townhouse on 13th West Street, and was already providing “shelter” to another friend of hers. I thus moved in and began looking for an apartment immediately. My shipment would come by air since Malawi was a landlocked country and would be in New York within a few weeks rather than months. If I wanted to avoid storing the whole shipment I needed an apartment quickly.

Buying an apartment in Manhattan

Friends had told me to study the real estate section of the New York Times on Saturdays and to look for small ads from individual owners. I did, and the first week I looked, I saw an apartment advertised which seemed to be right what I had in mind. I called, made an appointment, and liked the apartment on the corner of Third Avenue and 36th East Street. But I did not want to decide right there and then. The start was good, so maybe there were even better places to be found. I kept looking, but no other apartment had as much to offer as the first one. In frustration I told a real estate agent about the state of my search. In response he told me, if I truly liked the apartment and the building I should take it, as it was “a fluke in the market” as he put it. On his advice, I acted and never regretted my decision. I bought the apartment from an elderly couple who had moved into the building when it had been constructed in the mid-1960s. They now wanted to stay in their country house in Connecticut full-time and avoid the commute bet-

ween the city and the countryside. The apartment was within walking distance to the UN offices. This is a great convenience in a city where millions accept to spend hours for their commute to and from work every day.

Only, when I was ready to move, the trade union of the building attendants called a strike, and there was for about ten days no way I could get the permission to move in. I thus camped in the apartment for that period as I wanted to be close to work and acquaint myself with my new neighborhood.

Still within a few weeks, I was settled both in my personal and professional life. I had been prepared for both New York and Headquarters and began my life without losing a beat. By then I knew the ropes. Experience allowed me to go about settling in methodically and without too much anxiety. Buying an apartment was a new experience. But everybody was helpful and I trusted them. Only a year later it transpired that the agent who was to register me as the new owner of the apartment had disappeared with the \$ 25, 000, which I, like other buyers, had paid in advance. However, my bank absorbed this loss and therefore I was not too upset.

My work and its environment

I was now working in a department which was part of the central administration. This meant that I had to deal with the whole organization, all departments at Headquarters and all 132 country offices in the five regions of the world. This global outreach represented an exciting challenge and a much desired broadening of my professional horizon and experience. Four of the five regions I had lived in or travelled to, therefore in several instances it was familiar terrain and there were many familiar faces I was in contact with.

I was in charge of the computerization of our country offices, both in terms of deploying our corporate software as well as to connect our country offices to a corporate communications network using commercial service providers. I had failed to do so in Malawi, and I had no illusion how easy or difficult this latter task might turn out. The situation was complicated by the fact that our colleagues in charge of the technology could not understand why our managers of UNDP country

offices and programs were finding it so difficult to link up and to install the software. Conversely, our colleagues in charge of country programs and offices did not comprehend that the technology officers were so ignorant of the local challenges and the lack of budgetary resources for the purchase of modern information management technologies.

In the early 1990s, telecommunication services in many developing countries were firmly in the hands of one company (often state-owned) which acted in typical monopolistic fashion. If they were not ready for digital systems, so would be the whole country. Some multinationals bought the license for private communications links using satellite based systems, and paid stiff fees for this privilege, which we as UNDP could not afford. The data volume did not justify this investment, and the UN system as a whole was not ready to join hands and commonly embrace such advanced technology.

In several countries (like in Malawi) connectivity was further hampered by censorship and political control. I had taken a modem to Malawi in 1989 from New York and installed it in our office. But we never got it to work. We received the signals alright, but the data communications were not operational, because the Malawi telecommunications were not ready for such connectivity and did not open the telephone connections for data transmission. There were thus economic, technological and political obstacles to overcome before UNDP could establish a global e-mail system using the existing commercial telecommunications infrastructure.

Promoting office automation globally

In order to get a handle on these hurdles and a meaningful dialogue going between the technologists and the program and operations managers of the organization, my department developed the outline for an office automation plan. Together with two colleagues I defined on the one hand a set of minimum technology standards which all units and offices in the organization should attain within the coming three to four years, and on the other hand, we gave criteria and guidelines for the assessment of the local service infrastructure. I knew that many of my country office colleagues were mystified by this emerging technology and not very eager to get their heads and hands around it. Understanding and using these new technologies meant a steep learning curve for

them, which many of my colleagues in managerial positions were not willing to embark on. At the same time there was no way that a development organization like UNDP could not fall into step with organizations like the World Bank and other donor agencies which were proactively employing this new technology platform for their operations.

Our colleagues in the Budget Section were horrified of our plans. At the time, that the organization's budget had been approved by UNDP's Executive Board, nobody had anticipated such ambitious plans for office automation. The computing infrastructure of the organization was very patchy, and needs were indeed very big. In most offices not every staff members had a computer, an indispensable prerequisite, if we wanted to connect all staff members electronically. Several countries had easy access to commercial service providers, but the vast majority was left with few and, in such cases, always very expensive options. Many senior managers who were in charge of budgetary decisions were ill prepared to judge needed technology investments. They left decisions to junior staff, who took a personal interest in computers and computerized systems. But these colleagues lacked the maturity to assess which of the rapidly changing technologies were ripe and suitable for UNDP's use. We in the department at Headquarters wanted cutting edge, but not bleeding edge technology, and we wanted a platform which we could deploy globally for at least five years with a certain upward flexibility where the technology was easy to use, maintain and inexpensive enough to be justified.

Technical staff in the department was pushing for appliances and applications which were increasingly available in the US at falling prices. The director of the department was a technologist and new to the organization. He often sided with the technical staff and put the onus on me and the small unit I had under my direct supervision in addition to my function as deputy director of the whole department, to verify that these technologies were available and serviceable beyond the US. Following such an assessment, we then had to convince the budget section to make funds available and get managers around the world ready for the absorption of new information equipment and software. To make things even harder, the boss of my director was leaning on me to keep the budgetary implications in check, and not to approve technically new systems for which the organization did not have the

necessary financial resources. In a certain way, I was asked to square the circle. That many other organizations were in a similar situation did not help very much in managing our predicament. If others had the funds to sink into office automation, which may prove not to be as suitable as anticipated, UNDP certainly did not have such latitude. We had to get it right the first time round. We had to live with our decisions for at least five to seven years.

A computer per every staff member connected through a LAN

As much as I and my colleagues wanted to get the whole organization electronically connected, given the factors beyond our control, we decided to promote the introduction of LANs (Local Area Networks) first. Even if the gate from an office to a global communications network remained small and weak, at least we would familiarize all officers throughout the organization with these new tools. E-mails could be sent in batches to New York, while within an office they could be sent in real time. Application systems could be installed on a server in an office or Headquarters unit and made accessible to all who needed access. Data transfer could be initially made via diskettes and data uploaded into the Headquarters data base semi-automatically periodically, e.g. once every month.

I was back in a situation where I learned something new every day, and I liked it. Going home from work in the evening was a joy; the computer bug had bitten me and I worked at home many evenings late into the night. Once I was connected at home to the office network, there was no holding back. I sent messages around to colleagues almost day and night taking full advantage of the time zone differences. It was a perfect situation: I lived in a city with lots of friends and I was “developing” UNDP in a “playful” way. There were office politics to be mastered, but they were chickenfeed compared with the political situation in Malawi.

Using carrot and stick to change UNDP

In order to strengthen and upgrade the technology platform of the organization, the team I headed followed a policy of carrot and stick. All units and offices wanting to enhance and strengthen their infor-

mation systems and communications infrastructure were obliged to prepare a multi-year office automation plan using our standards, the generic outline and our guidelines. Such plans had to be signed off by the head of a unit or office or by his/her deputy. The plan was reviewed by us in New York and financial resources were given, once we had technically cleared the plan.

Our assessment was both technical, but increasingly it also became an assessment of the managerial capacity of the various units/offices in the organization. We discovered enormous differences in the way country offices were set up and carried out their business functions which, irrespective of the diversity of countries, were fairly similar. I therefore initiated the development of a model of the basic business functions of a UNDP office. We requested that a review of the organizational structure and the way the core UNDP business functions were carried out was included in each plan.

The resident representatives and their deputies were not amused. Not only did I push them to acquire a technology which they did not really want, on top we made the approval of the necessary funds difficult by asking them to undertake a kind of managerial self audit. By contrast, our finance and personnel departments liked our evolving approach and were allies. They, too, were interested in introducing new management competences and skills into the organization and in reducing costs. Our automation plans were for them a useful tool to see where the strengths and the weaknesses of the management system in each office and department were and where the potential for cost savings lay.

We had designed the plan in a way that it was easy to prepare and we left the initiative to the respective resident representative or head of department. We wanted to stay aligned with the increased delegation of authority which resident representatives received for program, financial and personnel decisions. While this decentralization was highly welcomed, for information management technologies the managers wanted rather a centralized approach and would have preferred that we handed out equipment and systems. We resisted, and for good reason. If decentralization was not going to be equal to abdication and a total lack of managerial oversight, then tools for self assessment and management audits had to be in place. Only instantly available information allowed monitoring and timely corrective action, when required.

Automation moved, as in so many other organizations and corporations, to center stage for the unfolding change process of the prevailing management culture. It was fascinating to watch these changes and to compare notes with chief information officers from other big corporations and public sector organizations. I often went to conventions and conferences and got an insight into the US American “corporate management” culture. The challenge for me was to determine which elements were of relevance to us as a multilateral global organization. This determination was not always an easy task when we discussed our options in UNDP: different views, different levels of familiarity with the emerging technologies, different priorities for computerized systems made the exchanges fairly inconclusive for reaching a common understanding and a consensus on how to move forward. But remaining inconclusive meant: to remain undecided and the possible loss of opportunities for change and gains in efficiency.

Information technologies change the culture of UNDP

When UNDP had been created in the mid-1960s, it functioned pretty much like a successor to a British overseas administration: highly centralized and held together by an “old boys’ network”. This feature was reinforced by the fact that quite a number of enlightened former colonial officers had moved into senior positions in UNDP in the 1960s. They shared a common view and vision for UNDP. Over time, under the pressure of the countries receiving assistance from UNDP, more and more decentralization was introduced and more and more staff members were recruited from all corners of the world. The common view came under serious strain.

In order to hold UNDP together, organization-wide networking arrangement needed to be introduced and commonly understood, and observed business rules and procedures needed to be revised or newly formulated. These could then be built into computerized systems. Emerging information technologies rather than staff’s experience or preferences became the glue to hold the management of the organization together. It was unrealistic to expect that solely the technology platform could hold a highly decentralized organization together—but the right choice of technology could certainly create cohesion. But for this to happen, we had to have all senior managers of the orga-

nization on the same side. When we began to step up the investments into electronic communications means and software systems, we were far from such a common understanding of UNDP. Some perceived the organization as full of fractions, while others were openly advocating a high degree of diversity under one “brand name” which would be filled with meaning by a common “mission statement”. All these discussions as interesting as they were did not really lead anywhere near a new common platform for our organization.

It also did not help the development of a new business culture that most offices had no technology management capacity and were pretty much at the mercy of enthusiastic amateurs or those who were providing services commercially. Many of the service providers were not respecting UNDP’s norms and standards, but were pushing for more advanced and more expensive solutions. For once, our colleagues in country offices were glad that we provided from Headquarters proactively backstopping services for their automation efforts, and shielded them from potentially expensive and erroneous decisions. Many resident representatives requested time and again that Headquarters make the technology decisions and deploy equipment and systems. But I continued to resist these demands. It was important that all managers would learn enough about these technologies to take informed decisions and be held accountable to these.

In particular our older colleagues among the resident representatives were reluctant to join in. Many were still not using computers (“I am not my own secretary”), and they cultivated their mental blocks. It greatly helped that I had been a resident representative, and was now learning fast to understand and to use the technology available to UNDP. At least it provoked the reaction by some that if she can do it, I can. But it remained an uphill struggle and a never-ending challenge to manage the technology–business requirement–budgetary constraint conundrum.

Fortunately for me, the Administrator of UNDP Bill Draper allowed our department to proceed pragmatically. I was no longer in direct contact with him, but he was briefed by others on what I was up to, and he sent word that this was okay with him, much to the dislike of my colleagues in charge of budgetary management. I had always preferred to work in such a way that the *powers that be* knew about my work, rather than to talk about it to them directly. It is in my view a

much more effective way to introduce innovation. Building up a momentum of change is more important than getting the top to take decisions which middle level managers might reject to implement.

After about two years we had achieved that the whole organization was finally on a steep curve of technological innovation. During that period, LAN technologies matured and became affordable everywhere.

Revolution begins

The introduction of the LAN technology amounted to a real revolution of existing management structures and practices. In several cases, we were told that managers insisted on clearing e-mail messages before they were sent. In other offices only selected staff received access to the e-mail system, and the boss had all his messages printed out every day to read and react to. In New York we chuckled about such anecdotes, but we also issued e-mail business procedures to help our struggling staff in country offices to open the system to all users and still avoid that in future everyone was sending e-mails directly to everyone. In the early days, the ease of e-mail communications was leading to information overload and bureaucratic gridlock, as decisions were sought from only a few who may or may not be authorized to do so.

UNDP's donors were still requesting a zero budget growth budget, and they were highly critical of our automation efforts. Their organizations had sunk huge amounts into new information systems and still had not reaped identifiable savings. We, by contrast, seemed to be getting it right, creating a momentum which was difficult to stop, and beginning to realize cost savings to our communication costs and gaining in terms of exact information being available more rapidly. After several rounds of discussions, the UNDP Executive Board gave us the benefit of the doubt. While the budget strategy remained one of zero growth, we received a small increase in the allocation for computerized systems in the next budget, primarily for our accounting systems.

The pushes and pulls on us were strong and could derail the carefully crafted process at any minute. If we lost momentum or under-invested, then already made investments would go to naught, and the resistance to change and the use of modern office technology would prevail. If we over-invested (meaning investing in unproven technology items), we

could lose a lot of scarce resources and build frustration among our staff for them these tools were means to an end, and not an end in itself.

A new organizational paradigm emerges

Our colleagues in some regions, e.g. in Latin America and Europe, were dissatisfied with the program management and accounting systems which we specified and programmed centrally. In other regions, e.g. Africa and Arab States, the installation and use of the latest systems was lagging behind. While colleagues in Latin America thought they could do without our systems and developed their own, other regions were not engaged. We thus had the challenge to steer a course which would not alienate one or the other region. Eventually, I could convince my system development colleagues in the department that we gave selected offices in Latin America the task to develop the global system under our department's guidance and supervision. I was referring back to the earlier experience when the system designed in the China office served as the model for the subsequent first global program management system. This approach seemed to be the safest to build a platform which allowed for needed management information to flow electronically throughout the organization, and at the same time to satisfy the information needs and management requirements of both country offices and Headquarters. It was a daring move and not all were in agreement that this was the best way forward.

As we deployed first elements of the new system outside Latin America, the differences in the local use of the system became glaringly apparent. Besides, most offices still did not have the communication links which allowed for an electronic data transfer.¹ Another round of organizational change was obviously required which new information systems would not be able to stem alone. The challenges of developing new information systems became quite complicated. Ongoing work on the program management and accounting system absorbed about 80 percent of UNDP's system development budget. Yet program ma-

¹ Initially, offices were only authorized to save their accounting data on a disk and to pouch it to New York together with the printed accounts and supporting documents. Staff in New York would upload the data from the disks into the central accounting system and compare it to the printed data. When over several months, the accounts of an office had not presented any problem, they were allowed to only send their disks and keep the printed version on their records. It was progress at a snail's pace, but it was progress.

nagers wanted to have document management systems, as most program-related information was stored in text documents. But centrally we lacked the resources and energy to address this business need, thus UNDP was losing out in storing and making accessible UNDP's vast development knowledge throughout the organization and to its partners. The World Bank was much more successful than UNDP in this regard. We later recouped some of this lack through the extensive use of the Internet, but the knowledge from the work of the early decades was irretrievably lost.² Changing the way UNDP worked was an eye-opening experience. An organization which had made it its business for the last 30 odd years to advise governments to change their institutions and to modernize their way of operating, was reluctant to apply the same opportunities to its own organizational structures and operating procedures. But the winds of managerial change were blowing strongly in the US and around the world, and eventually UNDP like many other public and private organizations set up a *change management team*.

Managing organizational change

After an initial attempt with external consultants, it was decided to form such a team from within the organization. In line with conventional wisdom at the time, the marching orders of the team were to be reducing budgets, which UNDP was using for its own set up and administration³, rather than to map a way for an optimal use of funds for intended business objectives and goals. Such more forward-looking perspective came

² Later on when I was back in China, I found all our files from day one of our operations in our office basement. We hired a few summer interns who scanned these files for us and we stored our knowledge electronically. But even in 2002 we were still lacking a text retrieval system.

³ UNDP unlike many other UN organizations is totally funded by voluntary contributions. Furthermore, some 10 countries fund roughly 90 percent of UNDP's annual contributions. Most of these funds come from development aid budgets. As demands on these budgets were exploding in the 1990s, voluntary contributions came under a lot of pressure, in particular as other organizations, which received assessed contributions, were raising the level of contributions faster than overall aid budgets were increasing. Hence, UNDP as the largest among the funds and programs of the UN system was the only one where national aid administrations could "save" in order to meet all the other demands. Besides, IDA, the quasi grant window of the World Bank, became ever more attractive to donors, as they felt they could control the use of these funds in LDCs better than the use of UNDP funds. These were disquieting trends and UNDP had to face them head on, if it wanted to be able to respond to the demands of all its stakeholders.

into UNDP much later, when Mark Malloch Brown became the new Administrator of UNDP in 1998.

Technical assistance/cooperation is a highly labor-intensive business. Not surprisingly UNDP was spending most of its budgetary resources allocated for its management on its staff and related costs. In order to be able to cap these costs, productivity gains had to be realized, and here information and communication technologies were of great potential benefit. But the challenges were the same as for other organizations embracing ICTs to reduce administrative costs. More funds had to be invested into the computer capacity and the information systems, staff had to be trained and those who were out-placed needed to be helped to find professional alternatives. In an organization which had offices in over 130 countries, these were no trivial challenges. Most important was to get the timing right: staff should not be laid off. Before better and more efficient working conditions had been found, each staff member's learning ability needed to be assessed and learning opportunities needed to be organized. Some global parameters needed to be established, but adjustments to local conditions were equally necessary.

The majority of UNDP resident representatives and directors at Headquarters by now had a mindset of unequivocal decentralization. In response, my department was advocating the networking approach with hubs and nodes on a global net of offices and specialized units. Many an exchange between us and senior managers in other parts of the organization was around this topic. The decentralization arguments ran: "Give us the money and we shall know best what to do with it." Our argument was: "Let's not reinvent the wheel every time, let's benefit from the best experience made elsewhere, and avoid through setting minimum standards the worst case scenarios." In many ways this is the tension in any decentralized organizational structure, but it took much energy and efforts to keep the dialogue going and to keep the course. In the end it was the centralized control over the budgetary allocations which saved UNDP from making major misallocations.

The going gets rough

By 1994, the change in UNDP was accelerating. I no longer felt like cruising in a calm sea. By now the going had become rough, and sometimes it seemed that the waves of change were crushing me. Little did I know that the going would get even worse in the coming months. My retreat for the weekends on Long Island was helping me to keep body and soul together. There were Saturdays when I was so stressed out that I could only sit in the garden and stare into the green trees and bushes to calm my strained nerves. I still would take my laptop with me and send the occasional e-mail to colleagues around in the world, but by and large I needed these weekends to store up energy and courage to face the challenges of the coming week.

Two decisions by the Administrator of UNDP helped our work indirectly. Against the wishes of some major donors, Bill Draper took the decision to expand UNDP's network of country offices to Eastern Europe and the CIS⁴. A few years before, in 1991, he had given the go ahead for the publication of an annual *Human Development Report*. With hindsight, however, both these decisions proved to be fruitful for UNDP's future, and the establishment of country offices against great administrative odds and donor interests showed to the rest of the organization how offices with low personnel cost, yet a high-tech infrastructure could and should function. These newly established offices also proved that UNDP programs could be started with even small seed funds from UNDP's core resources. If and when these core resources were used strategically, they could attract large additional funding. Our colleagues in Latin America and Eastern Europe were showing the rest of the organization convincingly how information management systems were essential for these new forms of development cooperation.

The *Human Development Report* showed how advocacy based on operational experience could enrich a development debate which was dominated by the macro-economic concerns of the World Bank and the IMF. The launch of each report also showed that, if handled independently of UNDP's ongoing programs, the credibility of their analysis was increasingly accepted—even if and when certain

4 This means into the countries of the former Soviet Union.

member states did not like what they read about themselves. Last but not least, the reports helped to propagate that there is a global development agenda and not only one for developing countries. The *Human Development Index* (HDI) lists all member states of the UN for which data are available, and it was always particularly interesting to note how the developed countries were vying for the # 1 slot and were proud when they received it (or annoyed when they did not get it). Although several challenges and opportunities pose themselves differently for OECD and developing countries, like for instance in the case of advanced technologies (HDR 2001), some are very much alike, such as the increase in abject poverty (HDR 1997). My department in turn could show that the text could be stored on a single CD and easily distributed inside and outside UNDP around the world.

Changes at the top of the organization and at HQs

By late 1991, Bill Draper had had enough of an organization and stakeholders who were risk-averse. He was interested in returning to what he knew best, i.e. venture capital investments. Before he left, he made sure that another American succeeded him. As it looked that a democratic President would be elected in Washington, he promoted the appointment of Gus Speth, the executive director of a Washington-based environmental non-governmental research institute, who was close to Al Gore. Bill Draper had been a schoolmate of George Bush, a Republican, but he was open-minded enough to propose a successor who would be well-connected in Washington with an incoming administration led by the Democrats. As senior managers in UNDP, we braced ourselves for what promised to be a radical change in management priorities, style and outlook.

Two things happened with this change at the top of the organization right away. UNDP's development paradigm of *human development* was expanded to become *sustainable human development*, giving the ecological dimensions of development a much greater prominence in UNDP's policy and program work. Many new managers were brought into the organization that had experience with environmental policies, conventions and funding mechanisms. Secondly, Gus Speth appointed some managers from within to senior positions, whom he consi-

dered capable and willing to carry UNDP's change agenda forward. Headquarters was restructured, several mid-level positions were abolished, and remaining vacancies filled with managers brought in from the field. For the first time in its history, well over 50 percent of the managers at Headquarters had extensive field experience. It changed tremendously the spirit and the attitudes. Combined with a corporate e-mail system and LAN-based information systems throughout HQs, the hierarchy became flatter, the processing time of transactions was considerably reduced and Headquarters became slowly the main hub of organizational change and the networking approach was taking hold in UNDP.

Changing functions

Since the end of 1993, it was clear that in the next biennial budget the department in which I worked would be merged with the administrative department being in charge of office premises, travel, telephony and contracting for goods and services. Thus a department was created, which managed all aspects of internal management, except personnel and finance. This was a rational change allowing for better synergies, e.g. in the area of communications, as now telephony and data networks would be managed by the same unit. Simultaneously, it brought a huge change to the way the organization was managing its physical assets like office space, equipment and service contracts.

I became the deputy director of this enlarged department, while Eduardo Gutierrez, one of our most successful resident representatives from Latin America, was appointed the director.⁵

Eduardo and I became a formidable team. Our background was development and program management; we were both open to employing new technologies, if and when they gave the promise of facilitating any aspect of UNDP's work. When Gus Speth called for his first global senior management meeting we identified commercially available text management software and distributed all meeting documents on

⁵ Eduardo had been resident representative in Brazil, when the UN Conference for Environment and Development was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. He was influential in having development aspects fully accepted by the international community and UNDP as an equal partner to UNEP and the World Bank for accessing funds under GEF, the Montreal Protocol and other environment oriented funding mechanisms.

one CD with a search capability. Our colleagues were stunned and some were frightened. But all were happy to just carry a CD rather than three folders of printed documents home to their respective duty station. We had bought a license which allowed worldwide distribution within UNDP and the installation on our LAN servers. At Headquarters we uploaded the files on the LAN servers and more staff than ever had access to these documents, irrespective whether they had participated in the meeting or not. It was the closest the organization came to having an electronic tool for document storage and retrieval available at the time. The IT revolution had finally reached the mainstream of UNDP! I felt with the new organizational set up and my new immediate supervisor, I had been handed an excellent surfboard to ride the waves of change, and I somewhat relaxed.

In the combined department the range of areas I had to supervise was greatly expanded. To my regret I had to reduce my involvement in the work of the ICT⁶ area, as in particular travel management and premises management demanded more and more of my attention. This became even more pressing when Eduardo Gutierrez was reassigned to head a newly created office of UN system coordination (DGO), which reported directly to the Administrator and was supporting him in his function as the top official of the UN resident coordinator system. The General Assembly in 1991 had passed a resolution strengthening the coordination of UN organizations represented at country level and designating UNDP as the manager of this system. As a result, the Administrator of UNDP had a dual function as had each and every resident representative at country level. Bill Draper had not been particularly interested in this second function. Gus by contrast acted immediately and got himself into a whole lot of inter-agency squabbles. The new office was created because other UN organizations insisted that UNDP should not integrate this coordination function into its normal operations. They were suspicious that this would give UNDP too much weight and influence over their country representatives.

6 Information Communication and Technology

Eduardo was an excellent choice for the position, as he was diplomatically skillful, while at the same time firm. He was loyal and discreet in his support of Gus Speth. But for me his reassignment meant double work. Only several months later was I finally promoted to the Director post and my post of deputy director was filled by another colleague, a bright young man, John Clarkson. As a trained accountant with extensive system development experience and a solidly pragmatic approach to things, John was a good addition to our department and a great support to me.

New York in the early 1990s

In those months, work extended from 7 a.m. until late into the evening, with many reading hours at home to keep on top of things. During my first assignment in New York, I had enjoyed Manhattan, and occasionally taken days off to be able to take part in what the city had to offer. This time, I felt mostly the pressure of Manhattan's restlessness, noise and dirt, and was glad to take the train out to Long Island on Friday evening or Saturday morning, and to escape to the rural setting of outer Long Island.

As with the first time round, it was my China connection, which produced my country retreat. I was walking home one day and met in the street a German diplomat, Kurt Leonberger, who had worked in the Beijing embassy in the early 1980s. We had lost contact, but there we were running into each other in a side street in Manhattan. Kurt and his wife Brigitte had rented a small cottage in Bellport on Long Island, a place termed as the un-Hampton Hamptons.⁷ We decided on renting a house together year-round next to the small yacht harbor. We even had a small private beach. It was marvelous to wake in the morning to the tinkling of the sails' ropes slapping against the masts of the boats, and to get out of bed and swim before breakfast in the Bay.

⁷ Most New Yorkers who could afford a summer retreat or second home on Long Island lived in one of the villages like South-, Bridge- or Easthampton. These are posh places, whose population swells manifold during the summer months. Southampton as a former whaling village is in fact very beautiful, but pricewise was out of our league. Bellport had been a whaling village, too, but lost its commercial attractiveness when in the early 1800s, a boat sank in the small channel leading through Fire Island to the open ocean blocking it and sediment eventually closing it altogether. Bellport had become a sleepy village of mostly year-round residents who were employed in the local economy near the town of Patchogue.

None of our American neighbors swam in the Bay, but we survived without any complications and enjoyed the pleasure of swimming in open water rather than a swimming pool.

During this second stay in New York I experienced the city very differently. On the one hand work was all consuming, but at the same time, I was financially better off, and could enjoy more freely New York's theatre, concerts and the opera. When I managed to get out of the office around 7 p.m. on a weekday and I was not too tired, I would take a cab across town to Lincoln Centre and see whether I could get a ticket to the Opera, a concert or the ballet.

As a member of both the Metropolitan Museum as well as the Museum of Modern Art, it was easy to meet with friends and enjoy a few delightful hours in either of these museums during the opening of special exhibitions or on the days when the museums stay open until 10 p.m.

In these years I learned to appreciate the convenience of American life. By 1994, laptops and the Internet made the office mobile. I could sit in the office in Manhattan, at home in my apartment or out on Long Island and communicate with colleagues around the world. I could thus tailor my daily routine around my personal needs and not around official working hours or the office premises. Meals were easy to prepare at home or ordered. Breakfast could be taken on the run from a street vendor or in a diner or at home. The economy around us was booming and outlook on life in general had an upbeat dimension.

Even the first attack on the World Trade Towers in September 1993 did not change this. We regarded it as one of these crazy things which happen in New York. A personal friend of mine had had to walk the 110 floors down of one of the World Trade towers, as she had a business meeting in the restaurant "Windows on the World", but we congratulated her for her sportive achievement, and laughed about her face blackened by the smoke. We were stunned and reassured that within a few days the police had retrieved from the rubble a tiny piece with the chassis number of the truck that had been used to carry the bomb. From this number they traced the car to a rental place in New Jersey and within a few hours arrested those who had rented the truck. It surely was a very different situation from the one after 9/11/2001. Most New Yorkers in 1993 continued with their life, while

9/11 truly changed their outlook and sense of security. Although I did not live in Manhattan in 2001, through contacts with my friends and acquaintances I noticed how much the attacks on the World Trade Centre towers had made them become aware of the social and cultural conflicts within the US and abroad. Many were surprised by the hostility towards the US and could not understand why people in other countries would have such strong and negative views on the US.

Experiencing globalization

One Saturday evening I was sitting at a house concert in Bellport next to an elderly gentleman, who had been born in Bellport, went to school there, had married, raised his family and now lived as a retiree there. All his life he had only been a few times to Manhattan, and had it not been for the Second World War, he might never have left the US. This encounter in a most comfortable setting of a village on the East Coast of the US made me realize that the world's society was deeply divided. It was almost impossible for me to explain to this gentle old man, what I was doing as a staff member of the UN having lived in Europe, Africa and China besides the US and having found all these places worth living in and exciting. He, like so many other Americans, could not understand how I could not find the US the most exciting place to live in.

As much as this gentleman and others like him could not fathom my life so could I not really theirs. I never made my peace with the fact that in Bellport, a very liberal minded community, the tracks of the Long Island Railways were solidly dividing the residential areas of the white and the black members of the community. The saying that one was born on the wrong or the right side of the tracks received visible meaning to me as I was riding on my bicycle around the village. Even the churches were grouped around the two different segments of the community, and during festivities of the village (e.g. on 4th July) the two communities never co-mingled.

I wondered: would the experience from an international, mobile life with direct experiences in several countries on different continents which I and my colleagues led, determine the outlook of future generations? Or: would the sedentary life of the vast majority of people around the world shape the views of our societies in future, perpe-

tuating old divides, and an unwillingness to accept changes for the benefit of peace and more equal development? I guess the jury is still out on this question.

Turning 50

During my first assignment to New York I had turned 40. During this second one, I was to turn 50. While I had enjoyed my 40th birthday celebration, I was dreading this one. Somehow I came to realize that I was beyond the mid-point of my life, and the question was: what had I done with it so far, and what remained for me to be done? The year had not been bad so far. I was well ensconced in my life in New York, and I had in recognition of my ability to manage the changes in my department been promoted to the highest level to which a UN civil servant could rise. I invited members of my family from Germany to join me in my birthday celebrations and we organized a big party in Bellport. But in spite of friendly words and many gifts, I could not shake the slight depression. However, challenges arose which needed to be met, and which made all previous challenges look pale by comparison. I had no room or time for nurturing a midlife crisis.

Demands from our top management came fast: I was asked to reduce the staffing of the combined department by 30 percent. That was a large number of colleagues (about 40), many of whom could not be reassigned but had to be “out-placed”. I was particularly concerned about those who had children in school or college. Staff had become redundant by technologies and the organization needed to cash in on the investments it had made in its technology infrastructure. First we focused on our colleagues who could be reassigned within the organization. Then we addressed those functions and services which we could outsource. I recall that at one point I had to speak to the registry staff. As paper based mail was largely reduced due to the exponential increase in e-mail, the registry workload had become very light and no longer justified the number of staff we had. Many had worked with UNDP for several decades, and they were solid workers, but their jobs were disappearing rapidly. I agonized over each and every case.

Only long walks along the beach of Fire Island helped me to keep my inner balance. It never ceased to amaze me that within less than two hours one could find beaches along the Atlantic coast where only the

seagulls, the dunes and the sea was keeping me company. Manhattan at those moments was light-years away, and life had a more peaceful ring to itself, even after a big storm had eaten away some of the dunes and broken some of the boardwalks across the protected areas. Eventually of all my experiences in New York, these walks along a deserted ocean beach, even in the deepest winter, were my fondest memories of my second time in New York.

Meeting new managerial challenges

But there were other challenges in store for me, bigger than any I had faced so far. One, which was very pleasant and stimulating, and a nother one, which let me doubt whether I wanted to continue to work for UNDP.

First, the pleasant one: UNDP Headquarters was housed in several buildings. The vast majority of our offices were in a building which an organization of the City and the State of New York had built for the UN, on the corner of 1st Avenue and 44th Street opposite the UN secretariat building. But the floors which UNDP rented there were not sufficient for all our departments. Therefore, we had rented additional space in a commercial building on 45th Street, which we called the FF-building.⁸ Normally the UN was exempt from paying taxes on the rent, but for the rented floors in the FF building, we did pay such taxes. My predecessors had either not paid attention or did not know about the exemption. The early 1990s in New York were years when several major corporations were preparing to move their offices out of Manhattan in order to reduce costs. The first terrorist attack on the World Trade Towers in 1993 had hastened such plans. The City Administration was very concerned and offered these corporations better deals in order to keep them in Manhattan. We thought that was our chance. In addition, the German government had offered UNDP to move its Headquarters to Bonn, following the decision of the German parliament to transfer the capital of the re-united country to Berlin.

8 An abbreviation for forty-fifth street building.

A win-win-win solution

I asked my staff to contact the office in charge of such negotiations within the administration of the city of New York. When we went to a first meeting, we were received politely, but without much concern about the validity of our request. However, the attitude of our hosts changed during this meeting. Not only did they understand that we had a valid claim, in addition they realized that there was a real danger of our moving if not to Bonn, then at least out of Manhattan. They promised to look into the matter and asked us in the meantime to prepare information for an official submission. Maybe they were still hoping that we would not get our act together. But they had miscalculated. We were able to prepare the submission faster than anticipated. Our submission made a strong case that the city would lose a major client who purchased goods and services from companies located in New York, sometimes for services around the world.⁹ The lawyers of the city administration began to look for a solution which would allow us to stay where we were and to be exempted from the taxes.

We were waiting patiently, but also wondering why it took them so long. Basically we were thinking that either the city would grant us a subsidy to compensate for the taxes we paid, or they would make an exception. But our assumption was far from what the city of New York was able and willing to do for us. The city administration lawyers offered us a legal solution which to the best of their knowledge nobody had made use of so far. According to them the UN could only be exempted from paying taxes if we either owned the premises or leased them from a US entity which was set up to exclusively service the UN. But we did not want to purchase the premises nor did the UN Corporation, from which we rented space on 44th Street. So, were we stuck? Not necessarily. Relevant state legislation allowed for title ownership of a premise, which did not include the purchase of the building. Such title ownership could be bought in principle for 1 US \$, provided our landlord was agreeable to that. Then we could make a new lease with

⁹ For instance, the moving company used for the removal and transport of household goods of UN staff being reassigned out and into New York as well as between many duty stations was a New York based company. Only years later did we open our “market” to competition by letting staff members choose among a number of pre-selected companies.

him and on the basis of such a lease and title ownership the city could exempt us from paying taxes.

The lawyers in the UN legal department had never heard of this solution, but accepted the explanations of the city's lawyers and gave us the green light for further negotiations. As we started our discussions with our landlord, another fortunate circumstance kicked in. At the time of our negotiations, huge amounts of office space remained vacant in mid-town Manhattan, and rents had plummeted. So much so that landlords either had to cancel and renew leases at a lower cost, or companies were moving within the city. Hence, it was at that particular point in time a renters' market. Our landlord knew this. Besides, the city was gently leaning on him to show an open mind and willingness to cooperate with us.

As we went into the final rounds of our negotiations and preparations for a new set of contracts, everybody had fun doing it. The city administration had succeeded in keeping us in Manhattan, the landlord was getting a 30 year lease in exchange for the title ownership, thus retaining his tenant in a volatile real estate market, and we were saving approximately 2 million US \$ in rental charges annually for the first five years because of the tax exemption. It truly was a win-win-win solution!

Across the street in the UN secretariat we became heroes, as nobody from the UN had ever succeeded in the last few years to get anything from the city without a major fight, while we were offered everything we were asking for. Our boss was satisfied, as the solution was saving the organization a bundle in budgetary expenses. Staff in my department was glad as we did not have to contemplate a major physical move to realize similar savings. We had looked at such options, but even within walking distance to the UN secretariat building none of the other options appeared as attractive as the one we had found.

I had greatly enjoyed guiding my staff in these negotiations and carry out some of them myself. They were professionally sound, we were in a positive exchange with the city administration, and I learned a lot about doing "deals" the US way. In this function, I had probably come the closest ever to being in direct contact with the US government administration like a resident representative in a country office. It was fun!

Dealing with incompetence and corruption

Now to the other, rather unpleasant challenge: UNDP had established several years ago a special fund, which was called the Revolving Fund for Field Accommodation (RFA) to finance the purchase or construction of office and residential buildings in duty stations where there was a major problem to find either. Mostly such problems existed in countries which had only recently become independent such as the lusophone African countries (e.g. Angola and Guinea Bissau), or where offices were only established a few years ago, e.g. Vietnam. The operating procedures were that only so many building should be newly acquired or rented with financial resources from this Fund, which were equal to the income from rents or the sale of a building. UNDP was obliged to sell premises as soon as they were no longer required, either because the market conditions had improved or the government had met its obligation to provide the organization with office premises. In other words, the Fund was supposed to break even each year. But for several years, the Fund was overspent, and on two occasions the Executive Board of UNDP had reluctantly agreed to increase the total resources of this Fund in order to address additional needs and to make the books balance. But UNDP was, of course, ill placed to run such a real estate operation. Besides, donors were more reluctant than ever to give additional resources for the administration of UNDP. Therefore, it was decided to balance the Fund through the sale of property that UNDP owned and did not need any more. In order to do so, we needed to establish the actual value of these premises. As we began to look into our files, we discovered huge gaps in our records, especially with regard to those buildings which UNDP had constructed or was still constructing in some African countries. It thus was impossible for my staff to establish the value of the premises which we owned, leave alone to establish a fair market value for them.

Eventually, we turned to an architectural firm in Manhattan which had experience with designing and supervising the construction of public buildings in developing countries, and contracted them to establish our investment costs. As we proceeded, major irregularities came to light. Rules for the letting of contracts had not been observed, invoices were not in accordance with materials and services delivered. In other words, we uncovered potential fraud and collusion between

contractors and one staff member. I was horrified. Rumors had always been flying about this particular staff member to be dishonest, but then we either had to prove it or disregard such rumors. When our own investigations had led to a point where we had to assume that corruption had occurred, we involved the internal auditors. We turned over to them all our files and findings, and they in turn suspended operations under the RFA.

Once the auditors took over the investigation, I as well as Eduardo Gutierrez and our immediate supervisor Toshi Niwa were investigated as the supervising managers. We were held accountable that for a long period of time and under our supervision these corrupt practices had been going on. I was stunned. Not only had I started the investigation, I even had withdrawn all delegated authority from the staff member alleged to have colluded with external contractors exactly at the moment I had evidence that irregularities had occurred. Now I was under suspicion of not having done enough in this case!

I was to answer an extensive list of allegations for dereliction of duty, and while I was replying to these allegations my delegated authority was withdrawn with regard to the RFA. On the one hand, I was relieved that I no longer had to deal with the matter; on the other hand, I was hurt. The auditors were quite obviously not making any distinction between those who had seriously looked into the mismanagement of the RFA, and those who had caused the losses to the organization.

While I responded in a relatively short period of time to the allegations, a closure of my case was dependent on the closure of all other cases. Hence, weeks and months went by without anyone of us receiving any feedback on our submissions. These weeks and months were terrible. Having to handle matters of which I understood close to nothing (real estate management), discovering that they had been managed in a way which was not in the interest of the organization, and potentially even in a fraudulent manner, weighted heavily on me. I was often considering quitting UNDP, but also knew that I could not do so until the investigation was completed. I knew that I had done everything which was in the interest of the organization. If others did not see it, then this was their mistake, not mine. I felt cornered and was depressed.

Finding recognition

My former colleagues in the information technology sections tried to humor me, and involved me in their work more than before. Upon the request of the UN secretariat, these colleagues assisted several permanent missions of developing countries to be connected to the Internet so that the secretariat could post daily communications electronically. Embassies from small developing countries were grateful for our services and had expressed their gratitude to the SG. Eventually, our team received an award for these efforts from Kofi Annan. But for me all of this was overshadowed by the pending matter of the RFA audit review.

Towards the end of 1997 after months of anxious waiting, I eventually received a letter from the Administrator exonerating me from all alleged lack of managerial diligence and advised me that all references to the RFA review would be removed from my file. My depression now turned into fury: because our audit director either could or did not want to believe that I was able to clean out the mess, which I had inherited, I had been put under investigation myself. He was clearly playing a nasty game. I suspected that he wanted me to be removed from my post before I was ready to move on.

Moving UNV to Bonn

However, before it came to such a move another challenge had to be mastered. As I mentioned the German government had offered UNDP Headquarters to move at their expense from New York to Bonn. Given UNDP's dual role as a funding organization and the organization in charge of managing the UN resident coordinator system, it was not considered a feasible option. With regard to the second function it was essential that the Administrator of UNDP was working in close proximity to the UN Secretary-General. Still the organization did not want to just flatly refuse such a generous offer.

As the highest ranking German at UNDP Headquarters I was asked by the Associate Administrator shortly after the offer from the German government was received, how UNDP should respond to the German government. I suggested why not move at least parts of UNDP to Bonn, or an organization which was closely related to UNDP, such as UNOPS or UNV.

The idea took hold and it was suggested to the German authorities to move UNV from Geneva to Bonn. Initially, Eduardo had led the negotiations on behalf of UNDP, but after he had moved on, I was assigned this task. I was thrilled. Not only did I get the opportunity to implement my own idea, I also was given the chance to negotiate on behalf of the UN with my own government. This was a wonderful and rare chance indeed.

We were given the choice between several buildings. Based on this selection we negotiated an agreement with the German government on the terms and conditions for opening a UN Headquarters site in Bonn, and we concluded a contract for the rental of the selected office premises.¹⁰

On the German side, the Ministry of Economic Cooperation had been given the task of negotiating on behalf of the German government, given that UNDP was the lead agency on the UN side. Half way through the process, a decision was taken that the secretariat of the UNFCCC would also be located in Bonn, and so the German Ministry of Environment wanted to get involved. Since we weren't sure whether that would be helping or delaying us in our negotiations, the UN secretariat advised the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs that UNDP would retain the lead role and that it would negotiate for all entities of the UN system. Based on this decision on the UN side, a similar decision was taken on the German side, and both teams speedily concluded the above agreements. Although I kept our colleagues from the UNFCCC secretariat fully informed and eventually included one of their senior administrative officers in our team, staff from other UN organizations still complained that we had not taken their special needs into consideration. Nevertheless, we were satisfied that the agreements were giving a fair deal to all staff, irrespective whether they made this move or stayed in Geneva, and we had found a location where operating costs were considerably less than in Geneva.

After UNV had moved, I continued to monitor whether the move had been beneficial to the organization. Although the placement of

¹⁰ The German government was giving a very generous one time contribution towards the moving costs of the staff and offices as well as towards the compensation to staff who did not want to move from Geneva to Bonn and for the recruitment of their replacements.

volunteers around the globe slowed down for a few years due to the staff turnover, staff that had moved was satisfied and liked their life and living conditions in Bonn.¹¹

Moving on and out of New York

After these successful negotiations, I was ready to move on. As I had also been given a clean bill of professional health in the wretched RFA matter, I decided to stay with UNDP, but to leave the administration and to leave Headquarters. Four positions at my level were falling vacant around the time I made my decision, but there were also four candidates. The question was how the Administrator Gus Speth would assign these posts to us respectively. My first choice was the post of the head of UNV. This assignment was most likely to be the last one for me with the UN and it would be great to be starting to live in Germany again. But the Director of Personnel indicated that this was highly unlikely. After UNV, my second choice was Resident Representative in China. However, I was told that Gus Speth was giving the choice to one of my competitors, Ed Cain, who happened to be a good friend of mine. If he were taking this post, then I could choose between Deputy Director for the Asia and Pacific bureau or Resident Representative in Egypt. I finally met with Ed and we discussed and agreed that he would choose Egypt, which left Beijing open for me.

These were the last of Gus Speth's senior appointments as he left UNDP a few months later to join Yale University as the dean of their environmental faculty. In June 1998, Mark Malloch Brown succeeded him. Mark came from the World Bank and was the first Administrator of UNDP who had been chosen by the Secretary-General of the UN and who was not just proposed by the US government.

In anticipation of my move, I negotiated a transfer to the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific as senior advisor to the regional director. Mr. Nay Htun had always been very supportive of our automation efforts, and I was confident that under his leadership I would be able

¹¹ Nine years later the UN organizations located in Bonn, by then they were 12 altogether, were given a whole campus in a refurbished high rise building, originally designated for the members of the German parliament. After the re-unification in 1989, when the Federal government moved to Berlin, this was no longer required by the German authorities and given to the UN for occupancy.

to get back into program management and possibly a senior position in Asia. Before I joined the regional bureau, however, I also did a stint as acting director of the Division of Personnel. Short as both assignments were, they gave me additional insights in the work of the organization. Particularly revealing during my assignment as acting Director of Personnel were the trials and tribulations to find suitable candidates from outside UNDP for the positions of UN resident coordinators.

As mentioned before, in 1991 the General Assembly had passed a resolution after the tri-annual review of the organization's field operations, stipulating that the representation at the country level should be done through country teams with the UN resident coordinator as team leader. UNDP was to manage this system of the UN resident coordinators, who normally should also be the UNDP resident representatives. Other UN organizations, in particular the funds and programs were up in arms over this resolution. As the resolution could no longer be changed, at least not for some time to come, the executive heads of other UN organizations decided to demand from UNDP that it should open its posts to candidates from among their staff. The Administrator agreed and instructed UNDP's Division of Personnel to identify suitable candidates in close collaboration with the Personnel Departments of the other agencies.

Because of the way the General Assembly read the resolution, UNDP insisted that candidates from other organizations should join UNDP for their assignment as resident coordinator and also assume the function of UNDP resident representative. Many potential candidates did not want to do this. They wanted to stay with their organization and be designated as resident coordinator in addition to their country representative function. This, however, would have made the management of the resident coordinators very difficult for UNDP. Consequently, UNDP rejected this solution. As a consequence of these squabbles, the executive heads of the organizations decided which post should be open for inter-agency competition and then candidates needed to be found. It became an almost impossible task: the candidate did not want to apply for the predetermined vacancies, or the competency of the proposed candidate was not in line with the specific requirements of the post, or when those had matched, a receiving country would not clear the proposed candidate. I spent hours and hours on

the phone with our colleagues in other agencies to fill positions facing all these hurdles. I do not recall that in the six weeks that I worked in the personnel division, I succeeded in bringing at least one case to a successful conclusion.

These 12 weeks after I had handed over my function of Director of Administration to John Clarkson were professionally and emotionally a rollercoaster. One day I was glad to have moved on. On other days I was full of anxiety over what would happen if the China assignment came not through. Dealing with the appointments of other UN resident coordinators reinforced my anxieties. In all of that I had little time to update my knowledge about program management. I was through with New York and Headquarters, but there was no end in sight. For once, the period between assignments was not relaxing, but full of anxious waiting for a definite decision.

Nay Htun sensed my nervousness and kept me well-informed. Through him I knew that the Administrator had no plans to open the China post for inter-agency competition. In late 1997, my candidature was submitted to the other agencies and at the beginning of 1998 to the Chinese authorities. I was the first woman to be proposed to this important post¹² which internally is considered the biggest jewel in the crown of the UNDP network of country offices. After the agency clearance had come through without difficulty, the clearance from the Chinese government followed in mid-February. And once again I flew to Beijing via Frankfurt in early March 1998 arriving there the very day the new Chinese government under Premier Zhu Rongji took office on 18th March 1998.

¹² Coincidentally, the India post was filled around the same time by another female colleague of mine. Brenda McSweeney left the UNV Coordinator post in Bonn and arrived a few weeks before me in New Delhi. We often jokingly said that we looked after the well-being of a third of humankind.



Gender Equity - Giving Girls and Boys Equal Chances in Life

6. Back To Where The Action Is: Beijing Round Two (1998 – 2003)

Never in my entire career had I been as excited about a new assignment as this one. I had always wished to return to China and see what had happened to the country and its people since the reforms began some 20 years ago. And here I was given the chance. I felt like having won the jackpot. I also felt comfortable for the first time in my career: I knew how to work in China from my earlier assignment, I had gained enormous professional experience since I left China in 1983, and I was at the highest level of the promotional ladder. Even for the role as UN resident coordinator I felt prepared, having been involved in several steps which set up the global resident coordinator system. I could fully focus on the work at hand without any worries about not knowing my job or getting another promotion.

Settling in was easy: a spacious apartment next to the office was waiting for me, which I knew from earlier visits. I had bought many household items and furniture from my predecessor, as was the custom, and I could use the survival kit for newly arriving staff, which the office held in store. I also had bought my predecessor's personal car, and was mobile during my free time immediately after my arrival, not needing a driver to get around. At least that is what I thought.

But I underestimated the vagaries of the greater freedom of movement for foreigners. In the old days, there were only few roads open to us beyond the city's limits. Signs of "out of bounds for foreigners" had kept us on the straight road to the Ming Tombs, the Great Wall, the Eastern Qing Tombs and some Temples in the Western Hills. Now there were many roads, and new ones to boot, and I promptly got lost on my first outing.

Discovering a new Beijing

The realization that some of the most spectacular landscapes had been out of reach to us in the early 1980s, which were now accessible within less than one hour's drive, gave a very different feeling about life in Beijing. In fact, this second time I began to understand the charm that Beijing had always held for so many foreign residents in the 19th and

early 20th century. Beijing is beautifully located in the North China plain surrounded to the West and North by a mountain range which has elevations up to 2,400 m. Tucked away in these mountains are Taoist temples and Buddhist monasteries, villages with intact houses dating back to the Ming dynasty and long stretches of the un-restored Great Wall. These scenic places are easily accessible through a web of well-kept country roads and the mountains are ideal for hiking and picnics. Many a weekend I would drive out with friends and visitors into the countryside. We would quickly be in serene settings, light-years away from the hassle and bustle of urban Beijing.

My return came at a time of the year when in the old days, i.e. 15 years earlier, few fresh vegetables were available. In the early 1980s only withered cabbages and a few fresh garlic sticks or wrinkled apples were sold. Now the sight of heaps of oranges and fresh vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers and green salad were the visible signs of improved living conditions for many Chinese families. I took lots of pictures of these displays as I had previously taken pictures of the heaps of cabbage in Beijing's streets when the winter was approaching and people were stocking up for the long winter months on their balconies and in the staircases of their apartment buildings.

The visible changes also made me a bit apprehensive. China had changed dramatically. Was UNDP still required? According to my briefings, the program was running well but with diminishing financial resources. The relationship with our immediate counterpart in the Chinese government were said to be strained and full of tension. The aid community had grown and outnumbered the UN system organizations in numbers and financial volume.

When I had left China in 1983, UNDP was an important external partner to China's reform and development efforts. It had been the first international organization to be asked by the Chinese government to open a presence in China. When I returned in 1998, China had many partners, and UNDP was small and appeared insignificant to much of what was happening in the country. I often said that in the early 1980s, UNDP had been a big fish in a small pond, now it was a small fish in a big pond, and there were predators in this pond, which were set to squash a small organization like UNDP.

The World Bank had a lending program of 3 billion US Dollars an-

nually; the Asian Development Bank's program was about 1 billion per annum. Many bilateral aid agencies had larger programs than the whole UN system combined. Not to mention that China was attracting foreign direct investments from the international private sector which was exceeding all aid many times. The trade surplus was giving the Chinese economy annually a healthy financial cushion, and the domestic investments made by the Chinese government were about 100 times larger than all development aid flowing into the country. Besides, China had always provided development assistance to Asian and African countries and it continued to do so, but on a much larger scale. In the late 1990s, estimates said that Chinese foreign aid amounted to approximately 500 million US Dollars every year.¹

Setting program priorities

In anxious moments I was asking myself whether I was going to supervise the withdrawal of UNDP from a China as it was soon no longer going to be a poor developing country. I also was wondering how, if we stayed, we could remain relevant to a country which was modernizing at a break neck pace. I made my rounds of contacts and started to listen to people living in China and to read about the current state of development. I began to see the enormous progress China had made and the returns on the investments into the education of young and bright Chinese who had studied overseas and returned to begin careers in government or in business. Only very slowly I discovered during these initial meetings openings and the potential for UNDP's continued cooperation in this dynamic country which was developing with the speed of an explosion.²

¹ This was the estimated level of outgoing aid in the late 1990s. By 2007, the Chinese aid volume was estimated to have increased to well over 1 billion US Dollars a year.

² It is extremely difficult to describe this sense and feeling of explosive development. Just as an example: not only had Beijing's urban appearance changed beyond recognition from what it had looked like in the early 1980s. In the late 1990s, if one had not been in certain parts of the city for two or three months, it could happen that whole quarters had disappeared and broad new avenues had been built. As victims of congested traffic due to road construction on the German autobahn during the summer months, we were awed by the speed and the ease with which the roads were built in China's cities amidst ever growing numbers of cars. During my five years in China, I saw the Fourth Ring Road around Beijing being completed, the Fifth Ring Road begun and completed and the Sixth Ring Road taking shape. Daily life in Beijing gave the strong sense that a "can do attitude" was all that was needed. Even in the remotest corner of the country (and I travelled to a few of those) one could find the echo of this mental attitude and the resulting dynamic actions.

Quickly I realized that the breathtaking changes produced by sustained double digit economic growth rates masked the fact that a large part of China's still growing population realized a per capita income which was similar to the one in Sub-Saharan Africa or least developed countries. Only the coastal provinces and the municipalities of Shanghai, Guangzhou and Beijing reached the level of Spain, other provinces were at least at the level of threshold developing countries like Brazil and Tunisia, but large provinces in the Western part of the country ranked similar to the poorest countries in the world. UNDP's first national Human Development Report on China, which was published at the time when I arrived, showed these tremendous regional disparities, and revealed how fragile the economic basis still was, when measured against the backdrop of the whole Chinese population.

Even more apparent than the economic imbalances were the social ones. China's population in the rural areas was still the largest segment of the population, albeit fast diminishing through rural-urban migration. Educational levels were low; health services had declined and in many instances had become too expensive for many Chinese families. While urban economies flourished, the terms of trade with rural areas were strongly in favor of the urban economy - a clear reversal from trends in the early years of the reform efforts. Old social practices had re-emerged, such as the preference for the boy child. The one child policy remained in force, and had led in some provinces to a gender balance which was unhealthily tilted towards a growing number of boys and a diminishing number of girls. Women who had gained so much in the years after 1949 in terms of social equality were increasingly pushed back into traditional female roles, which particularly in rural areas led to high suicide rates among women.

Somewhere in all of this there obviously still was a role for UNDP and the UN system, despite small financial resources. But a big question was how to seize these opportunities and play a catalytic role influencing the formulation of national policies and programs, as we used to do in the early reform years after 1978.

One insight came early and with great clarity. Three weeks after my arrival, in early April 1998, I was invited to open a seminar on Hainan Island, which UNDP was sponsoring and to which all lea-

ding social scientists in China had been invited. The topic was poverty alleviation in rural areas, one of UNDP's six practice areas and a major component of our ongoing program. I gladly accepted this invitation, also welcoming the opportunity to see this newly established province³ and to visit the Academy of Tropical Agriculture which had been the recipient of a small grant under our first program in China in the early 1980s. Only rarely do we as development professionals have the opportunity to visit project sites many years after our cooperation ended and enquire about the results. I was lucky and could do so at least sporadically now in China.⁴

I opened the seminar with a speech which my staff had prepared. When I familiarized myself with the draft I was surprised that no mention was made of the role of NGOs and other voluntary organizations. In particular in rural areas, where abject poverty nestles in locations which are difficult to access, the involvement of volunteers is often the only way to reach these otherwise "forgotten" families. Having returned only recently to China I wanted to listen and see whether somebody else would also spot this gap. But nobody did. Eventually, I raised my hand, and argued strongly during the discussion in favor of involving civil society organizations in such programs. The response was resounding silence. I obviously had struck a sensitive nerve and I made a mental note to pursue this further upon my return to Beijing. I also came back from this seminar with the conviction that poverty alleviation had to be addressed from several angles, and that this was best done through coordinated interventions by several organizations of the UN system.

The resident coordinator system of the UN

In the summer of 1997, the Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, had announced a first series of reforms for the UN system. In this round, the emphasis was on the operations in the field, where the UN was directly addressing the situation of people, in particular the disadvantaged through various programs. As part of the reform, UN country teams were to be formed by all UN representatives ser-

³ Before 1998, Hainan had been a part of Guangdong, but was made a separate province as part of an administrative process, which also had separated Chongqing from Sichuan.

⁴ For the whole story of this visit see chapter 2 above.

ving in the country, and the team was to be led by the UN resident coordinator, which was normally the UNDP resident representative. The country teams were to undertake a common country assessment (CCA), which should lead to a Five Year UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). Such a framework should be considered the business plan for the UN system in that country and guide all UN agencies and their national counterparts when defining their operational priorities during this period. While the CCA was to be prepared by the UN system in consultation with national partners, the UNDAF was to be prepared jointly and signed by both the UN system and the national government. In the case of China, many thought it impossible to obtain the government's signature given the decentralized practice of the China's government and loosely knit structure of the UN system. Coordination was weak in China when I arrived. The situation was so bad that it could only become better. I decided to give it a try nevertheless.

As could have been expected, my colleagues initially were skeptical, but help came from two sides. First, only ten days after I had arrived in Beijing, Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, was making an official visit to China. In his consultations with the local representatives of various UN organizations, he welcomed the proposal of the China team to go ahead with the CCA/UNDAF exercise. I had invited all UN representatives and the SG to come to my still sparsely furnished residence. My shipment from New York had not yet arrived. But the informal setting and the opportunity for each and every representative to interact with the SG directly and his strong support for our proposal shifted the mood in favor of a team exercise.

At the time the CCA/UNDAF exercise was still done on a voluntary basis by any UN country team. It had not yet been made mandatory. Hence, there were chances for us to determine how to go about our exercise, and the attention which the China team would gain if it completed the exercise could only be beneficial to each agency's program. Soon we had learned that not only we but basically all aid organizations in China were grappling with the challenge of defining which programs made sense and would have an impact in this vast country. Thus, consultations with the government, other aid agencies, and development-minded organizations were useful in developing a

consensual basis for our programmatic work and such a consensus also helped to delineate where and how the UN system could continue to be relevant to China in this age of rapid change.

Secondly, a few months after my arrival, Joe Judd arrived from New York as the new UNICEF representative. He had been in China in the early 1980s. He had since worked actively in the inter-agency groups developing the outline and procedures for the CCA/UNDAF exercises. Joe was glad and willing to share his knowledge and experience with us, the other members of the UN country team in China. A good UNDP-UNICEF relationship was crucial to the success of such an inter-agency undertaking, and I was relieved to learn that Joe was fully supportive and firmly committed to the China CCA/UNDAF exercise.

Our kickoff was a retreat. We first sought to come to a common understanding which of China's development challenges the UN system was able to address. The list of challenges was long, and not all could be possibly dealt with by the UN system organizations. By a process of clarification we narrowed our list down to about 10 issues. Still, the list was too long for our financial resources, but at least a start for further analytical work had been made. For this further analysis we set up 10 inter-agency staff working groups to advise us, the members of the UN country team and respective heads of the local UN offices, on the scope and shape of these 10 development challenges.

As a by-product of this first retreat, it became clear to all of us that not only would it be best to terminate a number of ongoing programs, more importantly it became obvious that we needed to seek new national partners, if we wanted to move into new directions and address different development challenges from those currently being handled. We all knew that seeking new partners always gives rise to misgivings, since the termination of a project and the selection of new partners and projects runs counter to vested interests, both on the national as well as on the UN agencies' side.

Overall, we came away from the retreat with a renewed sense of purpose and a better understanding of where the UN system could become engaged in China in future. We also developed a new attitude towards each other. We accepted that we were in the same boat. Only

if we all rowed in the same direction would each of our agencies and their operational activities be able to succeed and be recognized so that the results would be replicated and begin to have an impact on China's policies and the implementation of national programs. We established a timetable and asked the UN staff working groups to report back on the 10 issues within six months so that we could use the collected data and information as the basis for the formulation of a China CCA.

Renewing UNDP in China

As the CCA/UNDAF was firmly launched, I again turned my primary attention to matters concerning UNDP. The first few days in China had been devoted to my home coming to Beijing, and to detailed briefings by UNDP staff on the ongoing program. What I had done in Malawi spontaneously I now did systematically. I acquainted myself with each colleague and his or her area of responsibility. 12 colleagues were left from the earlier days, many had risen to higher positions and, alas, some to their level of incompetence. It was wonderful to see so many still being loyal to UNDP and working hard using their experience and well-established contacts. It was equally apparent that several of them would not make the cut for the new demands on us. Our future program would be more complex in terms of the type of interventions, it would have to venture into new areas, and we needed to give our projects greater visibility in order to raise additional financial resources from other donors. So far staff members were needed to carry out work according to established procedures and rules and with regard to programs and projects which were negotiated between the senior management of the office and the Chinese government. In future, national and international staff needed to be creative, outward going, networkers and knowledge managers. They had to advise the resident representative which opportunities they saw arising and strategize with me and my deputies how these openings could best be pursued. These new requirements demanded very different staff skills and competencies and a different way of carrying out daily work.

The initial individual assessments were bittersweet moments for me. Our long serving Chinese colleagues had clearly grown professionally, but at the same time lacked the competencies and skills now required

in a much more open and competitive environment. Aid organizations had to prove their worth not only to donors, but equally to Chinese partners. Otherwise their programs would be declining.

Improving staff capacity

During my meetings with individual staff members, I made mental notes of the learning potential which would determine who most likely would have a future with UNDP and who would not. I always belonged to the group of managers who believe that having the right people in the right place is the key to success. Careful assessment of each staff member's strength and competency was thus a prerequisite, not only for finding the most suitable post for each staff member, but also for charting a new course in our cooperation with China. If staff had to be let go then this needed to be done with due care and consideration. In many instances more than just the staff member is affected, and being not qualified for a particular line of work or position does not mean that the person does not have skills that could be used elsewhere. I therefore always tried to give staff the sense that there was life for them in a different post and beyond UNDP. We monitored as best as we could what was happening to those whom we let go. Fortunately, in the vast majority of cases they did find alternative employment.

Letting go of staff had its particular challenges in China, as some national staff were still seconded from the government to UNDP. In principle, those could be "sent back", but only on the understanding of the seconding national authority that they would provide a replacement, which we did not want. We wanted to hire and fire according to the established UN rules and regulations. While one ministry from which UNDP had recruited staff on secondment had tacitly accepted that they were beginning to hold UNDP contracts, the Diplomatic Service Bureau under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was dead against such a move. In the earlier days, this indirect recruitment had given the Chinese authorities control over the staff working for foreign offices and embassies. At this moment it was largely a financial question. For all national staff, UNDP like other foreign entities, was paying the Diplomatic Service Bureau a heavy overhead on top of the salary which we were paying the staff. This overhead was meant to cover

taxes, social security, staff development and, of course, administrative costs. While in principle justified, the lack of transparency surrounding these additional charges was annoying.

Our views in the office, and even more so among the UN country team members, on how to go about changing this situation varied a great deal. For UNDP I had full authority, for the offices and their staff of other UN organizations I had only a guiding role. Of course, as UNDP succeeded in having all staff, except for a few long serving staff members, fully converted to UNDP contracts, my other UN colleagues, especially from the smaller agencies, were eager for me to take over the negotiations on their behalf, a task I politely declined. But how did we succeed in UNDP?

Fortunately, I was familiar with China and its way of negotiating. I knew from past experience, that a lengthy discussion on what criteria or principles to follow was futile. Rather we had to follow a pragmatic approach and see where the interest of the Chinese side and our interests came together. In the first few years after 1978, this had been called to base an agreement on “mutual benefits”.

On the same day of arrival in China, a new government under Premier Zhu Rongji had taken office. One of the first announcements of the new government was that the central government offices should downsize. Since 1978 its ministries and central agencies had grown by large numbers. The new Premier convinced the party that this growth was unhealthy and trends had to be reversed and consequently plans were developed to reduce the number of civil servants in all central government institutions. Consequently, one of my arguments was that the conversion of Chinese staff serving in the UN offices in Beijing would take a sizeable number of individuals off the staffing list of the seconding central government entity, while at the same time giving them continued employment. Personnel departments saw the benefit to them immediately; finance departments were more reluctant, as they could not work out the potential financial “loss” to the Chinese side.

There was no way at the time to get clarity on the financial implications in terms of social security, like unemployment benefits, pension entitlements, health insurance neither for the seconding institutions nor for the individuals. We therefore took the approach to let staff de-

cide: most social security elements, except unemployment insurance, were given by the UN to all its staff members, too. Staff members who opted to join the UN as full-fledged staff members were not losing out with regard to these benefits. For the younger ones, this was an easy decision to take, and most of them decided without hesitation. For those who were in their early fifties or older, the risk was great, as we could not guarantee that pension entitlements would accrue to them retroactively. If not, their UN pensions would be very small and they would have foregone the government's provisions, which were small, but brought a number of in-kind benefits, such as free medical care and access to subsidized apartments.

We thus ended up with a two-tiered system: all newly recruited staff would have UN contracts, and we would only pay for them a small annual fee "for the administration of their files", whatever that meant. Serving staff below the age of 50 would convert, and receive a multi-year contract from UNDP. Staff above the age of 50 could either convert or remain government employees until their retirement from UNDP.

This new system gave us a much better choice in the recruitment of staff and we succeeded to renew and upgrade our staff caliber. At the same time, direct recruitment had its drawback. It exposed us much more to the vagaries of the Chinese job market: young and well-educated Chinese tended to jump from one job to the next as and when they thought there were better opportunities for them. In addition, they had the habit of committing to a new post or employment before they informed us, their current employer, of their acceptance of another employment. Invariably this forced us to either accept vacancy periods or to rush our recruitment actions. Neither of which was a desirable result, but it was the price to pay for being now part of the emerging labor market system in China.

With the recruitment issues sorted out and our staff contingent renewed and energized, I now turned to the tasks which I truly loved, namely to seek new opportunities for UNDP and to grow the program in volume and outreach. When I arrived in early 1998, the program spent some 20 million Dollars a year for all its activities and the office employed 72 staff members. When I left in mid-2003, we spent 50 million Dollars with 50 staff members and we were sailing hard in the wind of changes which were blowing through China.

Increasing the effectiveness of the UNDP program

An early opportunity for a rapid program evolution offered our line of GEF⁵ proposed projects which were at early stages in their formulation process. At the beginning of 1998, about 8 projects were prepared and were awaiting the final appraisal and approval. I was totally new to this part of donor-assisted cooperation in the field of climate change and biodiversity, and I had to learn fast and give it a great deal of my attention to fully understand what the purpose of these projects was and how they would be operated. One requirement for gaining the approval of GEF funding was that projects should have secure funding from national or international sources. GEF funding would only cover “the incremental costs” arising to national efforts in addressing the global challenges of climate change and the loss of biodiversity. As an old hand at project appraisal and approval I concentrated initially on guiding UNDP staff to accelerate the process and move our portfolio forward to the implementation stage. I did not question the selection of proposed projects, which had been done before I arrived. The GEF secretariat approved projects from all countries around the world on a quarterly basis and China had to compete against submissions from other developing countries. Starting in 1999, we had at least one project in the approval process every quarter of the year and slowly but surely we moved China to the top of the list of GEF beneficiaries. Although I had not had the chance to influence the selection of projects, I was convinced of the need for each and every one. China’s track record of controlling air pollution, handling industrial waste, preserving wetlands and coastal marine environments was pretty dismal. Water pollution had taken on dimensions that funds and investments of the World Bank or Asian Development Bank were needed to produce the necessary large-scale improvements. UNDP let this environmental challenge be handled by these two institutions retaining only two small technical assistance projects aimed at updating national water quality standards and strengthening institutional arrangements for water management at the local level.

⁵ At the UN *Conference on Environment and Development* in 1991 a funding mechanism for the two international conventions addressing climate change and loss in biodiversity respectively had been created. This was called the Global Environment Facility. For further details see: www.gefweb.org.

My personal interest was focused on those projects which had a strong policy orientation. For instance, under the UNFCCC⁶ and the Kyoto protocol, which had not yet entered into force at the time, China was not obliged to commit to the reduction of CO₂ emissions, but the national government was interested in understanding how to measure and calculate its emissions and to set its own national targets. The GEF had created a sub-category under which they were willing to co-fund such efforts, provided that the government benefitting from such assistance would agree to share the results in a communication with the GEF community. Moving the communication project through the Scylla and Charybdis of the Chinese technical and diplomatic community was a fascinating undertaking. After three years of sometimes intensive negotiations, we were ready to approve the project. By then a good part of the technical work had been done and the Chinese side had decided, which part of their findings they were willing to share with the international community.

With the GEF pipeline of projects moving rapidly towards approval, I could devote my attention to our portfolio of poverty alleviation projects, which my predecessor had successfully built up. Several aspects merited in my view some remedial action. One was the proliferation of almost identical projects which was only justified by the provincial interests of the beneficiaries, who wanted to have each a standalone UNDP supported project. This increased the transaction costs for UNDP considerably, as we had to process similar transactions many times rather than in bulk. Besides, it made it more difficult for us and our counterpart in the central government to monitor the progress which we were making with these poverty alleviation interventions in all corners of China, and mostly in very remote rural areas in the Western provinces like Xinjiang, Sichuan, Tibet.

The program was in full swing when I had come to China. The initial start up difficulties had been faced by my predecessor, and I was grateful to him that he had got the program off the ground with a lot of perseverance and stubbornness. Streamlining this multitude of interventions into a coherent set of actions under a larger project, which emphasized the common features while giving recognition to

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each and every project site, appeared comparatively easy. I initiated a mid-term project evaluation of our poverty portfolio and we began, based on the recommendations of the evaluation team, to restructure the program. Although there was initially stiff opposition from the national side, as soon as it became apparent that we were not reducing our funding, but rather freeing up funds because of savings through reduced administrative costs of these projects, the opposition died down. For instance, we bundled training activities for local officials and other support activities under one umbrella project, and funded more such events than before.

There was a second beneficial effect. Local officials in charge of these poverty alleviation efforts had felt isolated in the past in the vast sea of a rapidly richer and economically growing China with very different priorities than theirs. The restructured UNDP support brought them together periodically and gave them the sense of being part of a larger national initiative and in support of the national policy to reduce abject poverty of 80 million within seven years (1994–2000).

Had it been difficult in the beginning to streamline this part of our program, the second aspect proved to be more difficult to address. The interest rate, which we were allowed to charge borrowers of micro-credits, was far too low. Policy and political hurdles were in our way. The national Poverty Alleviation Office under the State Council wanted micro-credits to be given with a 3 percent interest rate, while we wanted to treat them similar to a commercial loan charging an interest of up to 12 percent. Even 12 percent would not cover all the costs, but they were at least more realistic in meeting these. Tackling this obstacle demanded to know the Chinese system and the way it operated, as well as to develop a clear vision of what we wanted to achieve. The latter is not always easy in the UN context, as many colleagues either shy away from confronting a national authority over a particular policy issue (which, of course, is the domain of national governments), or they give higher priority to spending the funds at their disposal rather than to focus their attention on producing a sustainable policy change (which might temporarily delay the use of available funds). Because of these differing interests, strategic and tactical moves are often confused, and the final outcome can be sub-optimal, if not, defeating the very purpose of the intended

aid. But here again, the delegation of authority from Headquarters to me as the resident representative in China helped greatly.

I first agreed with my staff on how high a rate we wanted to get agreed to. It was out of the question to raise the interest to a level which would cover all costs of the micro-credit scheme and make it sustainable. In such a case we would be looking at an interest rate of 45–50 percent.⁷ In the end we established the rate at 12 percent, as the going rate for commercial loans was 8 percent. Our reasoning was that a borrower being able to repay a credit at 12 percent might gain sufficient confidence to apply for a loan at 8 percent later on. The Poverty Alleviation Office listened to us, but did not agree. We thus were stuck.

Solving another aspect was, however, helpful in getting the above issue unstuck. We had very high transaction costs for the transfer of funds for micro-credits from our accounts to the eventual beneficiaries. Each transfer had to go through governmental accounts at the central, provincial, and the district level before it reached our local agents at the village level. Each level demanded a small processing fee of 2–3 percent representing substantial leakage of our scarce resources. To change this procedure was a decision which only the Central Bank of China could make. I therefore asked for an appointment with a deputy governor of the Central Bank.

First, I raised the issue of the transaction costs. After some reluctance he gave the green light that UNDP funds for micro-credits could be transferred from UNDP to our counterpart organization in the central government and from them directly to the local authorities who were granting the micro-credits. This effectively cut out the provincial and the district offices, which had nothing to add to this process, except to demand processing fees.

I also took the opportunity to raise the issue of interest rates, and again the deputy governor ruled in our favor. He advised the Poverty Alleviation Office that if UNDP wanted to charge more for its micro-credits, then it was free to do so, although this flexibility would not apply to government funded micro-credits. Interestingly

⁷ Beneficiaries of micro-credits always receive a lot of technical advice, which can and should not be covered by the interest rate of the credit. This decision prolongs the need for technical assistance to be separately funded and threatens the sustainability of any micro-credit scheme.

enough, our credit funds were as much in demand as before, and our local agents were very appreciative as it made them less dependent on blending our funds with those of the government, which had different criteria for their use and allocation. We had fought successfully and had found a win-win solution.

Poverty alleviation: giving the poor a break

Over the years I visited several of our project sites, which were in very remote locations. The last few miles one invariably had to walk as no roads existed for vehicular traffic. Yet, the houses of our beneficiaries were spic and span. The stories they had to tell were moving. Time and again we heard how a small credit of about \$ 100 had changed not only their income situation for the better, but the whole life of their families. It always was somewhat embarrassing to me to listen to these life stories. How often did I spend 100 bucks for less essential things? The inordinate positive impact a small credit together with some technical advice had had on these families was mind boggling. The vast majority of those receiving a credit were women. This had not been UNDP's intention, but the men considered our credits too small to be interested. However, they were always coming to the training sessions which were organized for our projects' beneficiaries. It took repeated efforts on our side to ensure that our credit-takers were attending the training sessions, and not their husbands. We wanted to inform them how the credit scheme worked and how they could make best use of the funds they had borrowed. It was up to them to share this newly acquired knowledge with their husbands.⁸

Time and again I found that intelligence and entrepreneurial talent were independent of the individual degree of literacy. Many of our beneficiaries were illiterate, but exceedingly successful in realizing big returns on their investments. In one case, a woman in her 30s told us that she had been close to committing suicide, because she could not see a future for her and her family. After she participated in our project, her family income and overall situation had improved so much, that she became a community leader and helped to replicate her success in many more households. One family had invested their profits

⁸ It was not the knowledge the husbands were necessarily after, but the daily subsistence allowance which was paid to the trainees and the paid trip to a nearby town where the training was held.

in a telephone connection which they used to enquire about prevailing market prices for their crops in urban markets. Such timely information made them less dependent on the prices which the middlemen were offering. Through this better access to information the family was not only helping themselves but also their neighbors.

What I already had found in Malawi I was confronted with again in rural China. In order to make such worthwhile poverty alleviation efforts sustainable, more funds, more knowledgeable staff, more organizational strength was required to get a handle on abject poverty. On one of my visits to Southern Xinjiang I calculated that, if poverty alleviation continued at the pace it was at, it would take in this particular county around 30 years to reach all deserving poor households. China as a whole was counting to triple its GDP within this same period. A sobering thought!

The UN Common Assessment/UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) comes to life

Much later than planned, we finally had a first draft of our Common Country Assessment. Based on the work of the inter-agency working groups the first draft was rough, but had some real gems in terms of analytical insights into the state of affairs of China's development. The question now was: should we share this rough draft with the government and other donors and risk that the attention would be focused on the unfinished state of the draft, or: should we first polish it and then risk that we might have overlooked some important aspects? We were delayed by several months, so we decided to take the first option. Fortunately, all participants in our stakeholder consultation meeting stayed the course and focused on content rather than the form of the draft. The outcome of the meeting was very revealing. First, it had been easy to state a certain number of issues; it was much more difficult to understand and reach a consensus on the underlying causes and collect needed statistics and data sets. Second, the government in many instances was much more advanced in addressing the issues than we had known until then. Third, other external aid agencies were finding the process useful to their own work. As the reach of the UN system was wider than theirs, they could piggyback on our assessment and deepen their analysis where it was necessary for their cooperation programs.

For the first time ever, we also had invited a number of international and national NGOs that were appreciative of our invitation, but also somewhat overwhelmed. Yet, it was a beginning to signal to the government and to donors that there were NGOs in China as well, and that they were interested in cooperating with the UN system, other aid organizations and agencies in support of governmental policies.

We as the UN country team were pleasantly surprised by the result. The process had at times been painful, and had gotten stuck more than once. In spite of our academic capacity, between all UN organizations represented in China we had some 100 professionals with PH.D or master degrees, our working groups had struggled to follow the suggested methodology of collecting data, reviewing them and then producing an analysis of social and economic challenges. Something many UN staff members complained about frequently had proven to be right. Through the daily chores, which are largely of an administrative nature, many of our staff had been de-skilled and their intellectual knowledge and competency had been greatly reduced. The CCA exercise thus also served as a wakeup call to us as managers and to our staff, that they had to deliver more than arranging meetings, seminars and organizing programs for visiting missions, of which, of course, we had plenty every day.

Interestingly enough, while the CCA process had taken us 18 instead of 14 months, the following UNDAF formulation process took much less time, so much less that we finished the whole process at the planned target date. This was another lesson we learned: if we invested into the analysis of the situation, formulating a business plan such as the UNDAF or a cooperation program was much easier to achieve. The development cooperation community had so far heavily focused on following such an approach for the identification and formulation of projects. But had undervalued the need and usefulness to identify and formulate an analytical framework for their program under which projects should be selected.⁹ We thus experienced firsthand the paradigm shift towards stronger policy-orientation.

⁹ During a *future search* exercise we chose three themes for our UNDAF 2001–2005, under which we felt that all the 10 issues we had identified at the beginning could be subsumed. The three goals were: promote sustainable development to reduce disparities, support favorable conditions for the national reform and development process, assist China's efforts in meeting global challenges and promote international cooperation.

Among the national participants in our CCA/UNDAF exercise were junior members of the State Planning Commission. They were engaged in the preparation of the next Five Year Plan for 2001–2006. After the Five Year Plan had been completed, they acknowledged that their participation in our UNDAF exercise had greatly facilitated their work in finishing the national plan. In a subtle and informal way we thus influenced the attention which the national planning authorities were giving to development issues. These participants also helped us to have the government sign the UNDAF document without too much ado.¹⁰

Even the World Bank and the IMF representatives participated in our meetings and signed the UNDAF without hesitation. As UN resident coordinator I had obtained such a broad basis for the UN business plan and its priorities for the next five years as was possible.

Although we had finished the document before the Millennium Summit in September 2000 in New York and the publication of the Millennium Development Goals, the UN country team had anticipated a good many of the goals and we were now poised to reshape our programs during the years 2001–2006 in support of the achievement of the MDGs addressing poverty, hunger, the situation of women and children (and the ever growing number of the elderly), the environment, and the rapidly spreading infections with HIV causing AIDS.¹¹

A new priority for UNDP: strengthening the rule of law

I continued to alternate between my role as UN resident coordinator and UNDP resident representative. The outcome of the CCA/UNDAF process had brought home the realization that UNDP needed to focus its program much more on governance issues. Up to this point in time,

¹⁰ Like in any bureaucracy inter-ministerial cooperation and coordination is not easy in China. To avoid too many hurdles, we had suggested to the government to form a national mirror team to the UN country team under the coordination of UNDP's counterpart, Vice-Minister Long Yongtu, who for a number of years had worked with UNDP and was now chief negotiator for China's entry into WTO. He was not really my counterpart in the government, but because of his long-standing association with UNDP I could meet him whenever I needed to.

¹¹ The eight MDGs are: 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, 2. Achieve universal primary education, 3. Promote gender equality and empower women, 4. Reduce child mortality, 5. Improve maternal health, 6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, 7. Ensure environmental sustainability, 8. Develop global partnership for development.

UNDP had worked extensively with the executive branch of the government and the People's Congress as the highest legislative body. It was now time to also engage in strengthening the judiciary¹², in order to support the national emphasis on strengthening the *rule of law*.

Shifting UNDP's attention and funds to the strengthening of the *rule of law* required a major effort on my part.

In UNDP strengthening the *rule of law* was defined as "better access of the poor to the justice system". While this was in principle a good objective, it overlooked the fact that in countries where the justice system was institutionally weak approaching it from the angle of poverty was not the most obvious way to improve the system as a whole. But that was needed in China.

Many foreign partners of China were competing in this field. All were under enormous pressure from the business community which demanded greater stability and predictability in the application of laws and the settlement of disputes in court. The most prestigious law schools of the USA were vying to establish law centers at key universities in China such as Beijing University and Tsinghua University. During one of his earlier visits to China, Gerhard Schroeder, the German Chancellor, promised German development assistance towards the strengthening of the Chinese judiciary. We as the local UN representatives had little by way of such high-level support, although the frequent visits to China by Mary Robinson, the newly appointed High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the beginning cooperation between her office, other UN organizations and various parts of the judicial system in China opened doors for UNDP and provided me with much needed access to the leadership of the Chinese judiciary.

In my capacity as UN resident coordinator I accompanied Mary Robinson to almost all of her meetings and thus became introduced to a completely new set of Chinese authorities and officials. Similarly, the UN development system was a discovery to these Chinese officials. I sometimes felt as if I had returned to the earlier days of UNDP

¹² Philosophically, the Communist Party of China refuses the notion of separating the three arms of government. Nevertheless, for our purposes it was useful to make this distinction and to reach out to the judicial organs such as the Supreme Court, the Supreme Procuratorate and the Ministry of Justice as the supervisory body for lawyers in China and the Ministry of Public Security.

in China, when we had to explain first what the UN development system was and how it could be accessed. In order to be technically better equipped for the emerging dialogue, I recruited a Chinese legal scholar Jerry Li as my advisor. As a UNDP staff member and as a Chinese he was able to obtain access to many high ranking officials, and he helped to overcome the hesitancy of these officials to meet with me. But I hesitated to jump into the formulation of concrete projects too quickly. I first wanted to better understand the overall situation and identify leverage points for our cooperation to have an optimal impact on the ongoing judicial reforms.

Jerry provided me with good insights into the organizational structure, the persisting professional weakness of the judicial system, as well as the continuing presence of the old *rule by man*.¹³ One element of the traditional system was that judges could consult with higher level courts before passing their judgment, making a mockery of any appeal later on to such higher level courts.

The Chinese judiciary had suffered a lot in the years since 1949¹⁴ and was indeed very weak in terms of the legal expertise and numbers of staff. Consequently, officials were not very sure what kind of assistance to request from us, as the demands for strengthening the capacity went way beyond what we could offer. We therefore proceeded cautiously in the programming of our technical assistance in order to achieve maximum impact on an improved performance of the judiciary, which from outside China was always measured in terms of the protection of individual human rights.

Even before my arrival, UNDP and later some other donors had begun to extend foreign aid to the Supreme Court in support of the National Judges Training Centre in Beijing.¹⁵ Of the three professional

¹³ A summary of my understanding of the situation as it existed around 2000 is published in Jerry Z. Li, *Rambling along Public Law*, Hong Kong, September 2006

¹⁴ At one point in the 1950s Mao Zedong had ruled that China no longer needed any legal system. Nevertheless, with Soviet assistance the legal system was revamped and made similar to the system in the Soviet Union.

¹⁵ I had “inherited” a project from my predecessor in this field: the support to the National Judges College, which, however, was ending at the time I arrived in China. As many bilateral donors were by then extending assistance to the same institution, I let our assistance lapse against strong resistance from the Chinese side. But I thought that our catalytic role had been fulfilled and it was time for us to move on with our program.

groups in the judiciary (judges, procurators, lawyers) it was the judges which were the first to benefit from such support, because all aid agencies had based their choice on the supreme role which judges play in the tripartite system in the judiciary in Western countries. Yet, a more careful review and assessment of the Chinese system would have revealed that China had adopted the Soviet system in the early 1950s.

According to this system, the procurator had the highest authority and played a key role in the Chinese judiciary. In addition to representing the interests of the people in a trial, the Procuratorate also has supervisory authority over the whole system. In other words, in order to strengthen the *rule of law* through reforms of the judicial system, the strategic entry point was the Supreme Procuratorate and not the Supreme Court.

As soon as I had understood this special feature of the Chinese system, I offered a platform for leading staff from all three branches to meet with Chinese legal scholars in our office conference room and discuss how best they could synchronize their respective reform plans. In this meeting, some 20 leading judicial officials and scholars from various universities and research institutes came together with those in charge of policy and planning in the central organs of the police, the Supreme Court, the Supreme Procurator and the Ministry of Justice. Some glaring discrepancy came to light. While the judges had accepted that accused could be tried on the basis of circumstantial evidence and not only on the basis of their confessions, the police had not yet got that far. Consequently, pressure, even torture, still occurred during police interrogations, although the Ministry of Public Security stated repeatedly in meetings with me that torture was not permitted throughout the police service. In only one meeting we had thus identified one of the major causes why torture was still practiced in China and day to day work by the police was not always in line with the *International Convention against Torture* which the People's Congress had ratified in 1988.¹⁶

The participants of the meetings were grateful for my initiative and eventually a full set of projects emerged which were assisting in parti-

¹⁶ The International Convention against Torture entered into force in 1984 and China had ratified it only four years later, but according to media reports the observance of this convention was still quite spotty to say the least.

cular the Procuratorate, the police and the Ministry of Justice in their reform efforts.

China is possibly one of the few countries in the world which has not a sufficient number of lawyers. This shortage of legally trained professionals, who can assist individuals and legal entities in securing their legal rights, is one of the many results of the zigzag development course of China's judiciary after 1949. Since the opening of the country to the outside world, external partners were demanding from the Chinese authorities a stable and predictable legal environment. It was largely this pressure which set the strengthening of the judiciary in motion.

The protection of human rights

Only over time similar demands were made by Chinese citizens. In response, the central government decided that the Ministry of Justice should provide legal assistance to individual citizens. A group of officials had studied relevant legal practices in Western countries and came up with the concept of setting up under each provincial and municipal Bureau of Justice a legal aid center with lawyers who provide legal counsel to individuals who are too poor to afford a lawyer. Initially, the local bureaux of justice did not have any financial resources for such assistance, and that is how UNDP got involved. We provided some seed funding for a few local bureaux so that they could recruit Chinese lawyers and we made funding available for at least one training course over a two year period of staff in all existing centers. The latter became a moving target. Once the bureaux decided (under pressure from the central ministry) to use part of their income from notary fees for the financing of their legal aid centers, these centers sprung up faster than the ministry and we could follow. It was amazing to see how the local officials seized their opportunity to provide a service to deserving citizens, which would let the judiciary appear in a positive light. At the time, most Chinese had a very low opinion of the legal system and considered it "shameful" to take a dispute to court. They also had little trust into the system. Hence, the Ministry of Justice and their local subsidiaries had a strong interest in changing this perception.

The strengthening of the legal aid centers in China within the ambit of the Ministry of Justice was a wonderful instrument to help protect

individuals against the arbitrariness of public organs and criminal activities by neighbors and others. It was human rights protection in action, and one of my favorite projects.

Fighting the discrimination of women

Another discrepancy between reality and policy was brought to light again in just one meeting. This time it concerned the equal opportunities of women and men in public service.

It was glaringly apparent that few women were in senior positions in the government and in the party. Most held deputy posts, if and when they had made it to the top. Then one day in a staff meeting in the UNDP office it was mentioned that women retired at age 55 from public service while men did so at age 60. When I asked whether women *could or had* to retire at that age, I was told they *had* to retire. This information hit me like a lightning bolt. Most officials reached the launching pad¹⁷ for higher office in their late forties or early fifties; women would then be considered too close to retirement for further advancement. Most of them had lost some time due to childbirth and maternity leave, and were normally behind their male peers in terms of seniority.

Gleefully, I picked up this issue and had heated discussions with officials in the judiciary over this “discriminatory” practice. I even went as far as to say that it was unconstitutional. The mostly middle-aged gentlemen who were my interlocutors on the subject could not understand why I went so far. In their view it was a protective measure to permit women to retire five years earlier than men and in the interest of their health and well-being. I argued that this practice was discriminatory because women were not permitted to retire at age 55, but that they had to. If it was changed to make it an equal choice for men and women, then it would be okay. Eventually, the director in charge of policy formulation in the Supreme Procuratorate promised to look into the matter and see what needed to be done about it.

More importantly, however, I got the legal experts at the All China Women’s Federation to pick up this issue. To hear them argue their

¹⁷ For instance, the rank of a Director-General in a ministerial setting.

case at the highest level was a real joy, although they did not advance the constitutional argument. It was a too new concept in China to build one's case on constitutional considerations. But they made it a human rights issue which gave their discourse the right touch and compelling reasoning.¹⁸

On the advice of UNICEF, I spoke against another discriminatory gender issue on several public occasions: the discrimination of the girl child. Mostly I did so in my role as UN resident coordinator, but in the context of our poverty alleviation projects I also picked it up as UNDP resident representative. I recall a short conversation with a very poor farmer in remote Yunnan who told us that he had two children, both girls. When I asked him, whether he wanted another child preferably a boy, he responded "not necessarily". He said that he was happy with his daughters, and that he had paid the stiff fine for the second child quite willingly, but that his wife was unhappy about the situation. I had the impression that he had been coached by the local officials to give the "right" answers to my questions.

Throughout the Chinese society there was no breaking through the brick wall that parents thought that for their old age boys rather than girls were important. I therefore spoke at one of the events in connection with the International Women's Day, which was attended by the top brass of the party and government, about the persistence of such traditional preferences and the ill effects on the demographic development. I ended my speech with the statements that daughters who were allowed to be successful in life were as likely to care for their ageing parents as sons, and that in most cases it were not the sons but the daughters-in-law who were caring for the elderly in the family. My remarks gained long-lasting applause. Obviously I was running in open doors with this audience, but would such support at the highest level suffice to change the situation?¹⁹

¹⁸ By now the Chinese system has found a pragmatic solution to the issue: in many ministries and public services women who are division chiefs can remain in service beyond the age of 55. This gives them the chance to advance to the director level and even higher.

¹⁹ Not only China has this problem. In other Asian countries similar preferences persist. The result is that there are a disproportionately high number of men per women, giving rise to the trafficking of women and the girls from poorer areas into better off provinces or even across borders from some of China's neighboring countries such as Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar.

In the emerging middle class there was a trend clearly visible: in families where both husband and wife worked, *he* would work in the government and *she* in business. *He* brought status and *she* brought the money. That was the winning formula in Beijing and Shanghai and many other cities throughout China. In the rural areas the situation was different. In particular in families where husbands had gone away as migrant workers, the women left behind found themselves in socially confining circumstances. If they still had a plot of land, they would cultivate it. In many instances, the growing of their crops would cost them more than if they bought them in the local market. But as cash in the family was short, they did not have a choice. The money their husbands sent was used for the school fees of their child or children, the payment of health related costs and support for the parents-in-law. No wonder that the suicide rate among these women was very high. Besides, it was these women who later became the recruitment pool for the Falun Gong in rural China.

Coping with rapid social and economic change – the case of the Falun Gong

During our first UN country team retreat in the Western Hills in October 1998, I walked with one of my Chinese colleagues in the forested hills. While we were walking up the hill at 7 a.m., old men and women were coming down already. It never ceased to amaze me with how much gusto elderly Chinese were routinely doing their early morning exercises in order to stay fit.

On our stroll we happened to pass by a small pavilion where a group of elderly people had congregated and listened quietly and intently to somebody speaking. I asked my colleague what this was all about. She went to listen herself, and came back to say they were listening to a taped message of spiritual and exercise messages. We did not pay any further attention and went to our meeting. Many months later I realized that we probably had come across one of the Falun Gong gatherings. We continued to hear about this group who, according to our Chinese friends, was actively proselytizing their colleagues and neighbors. But we still did not give it much thought. That changed dramatically when during the Easter week of 2001 the Falun Gong staged a peaceful demonstration in front of the walls of Zhongnanhai,

the residential quarters of the national political leaders. It took a few weeks before the government and party reacted, but then with a fury which was taking everybody by surprise. The government's reaction led to an escalation of a conflict which was born out of the deterioration of the social security for many Chinese. Especially elderly women were affected. They felt most strongly the impact of rising living costs and the disappearance of accepted values. They often were at a loss to understand the tremendous changes which were occurring around them and were affecting them. For them these changes did not lead to better living conditions. They experienced the reform era with a sense of being lost in a sea of change which was drowning everything they had believed in so far.

While we as foreigners resident in China were trying to comprehend what this group and the teachings of the Falun Gong were all about, a drama of epic dimensions was unfolding before our eyes. Official China was instructed from the highest level down to the local level to "crush" this movement. Police officials were held personally accountable for public events such as self immolation which were occurring in their areas of responsibility. Officials in the administration were held accountable if publications of the Falun Gong were found in the offices or in the possession of their staff. In spite of this massive pressure, the members of the Falun Gong were set not to surrender their new found beliefs and practices, which in their views were helping them to stay physically and mentally healthy by means which they could control.

It was impossible for me and others to understand why the Chinese authorities had entered into such a fierce fight. The demonstration of the group had occurred, because the Chinese government could not decide whether the group was a NGO or a religious organization. As a result of this indecision, the group was not registered in China and considered illegal. They wanted to change this situation and with their demonstration they had wanted to put pressure on the Chinese government to legalize them. They did not seem to realize that this was the worst thing they could have done. It was well-known throughout the diplomatic and press corps that President Jiang Zemin abhorred public demonstrations of any sort, and certainly those which were openly criticizing the government and the party which he led. Chi-

nese leaders were still carrying deep wounds and scars from the Cultural Revolution and the events of 1989. Nobody in power was interested in being drawn into a conflict which was handled in the streets. Therefore, the government and the party pulled the conflict into the system, spreading fear and resentment against the members of the Falun Gong, who on the other hand only became more socially marginalized and obsessed with winning official recognition in China.

The Chinese media did not shy away from drawing foreign dignitaries into the conflict, while the foreign media prominently reported on the torture and imprisonments of individual Falun Gong members. On his annual visit to China in 2001, Kofi Annan was asked by a Chinese journalist in Tokyo on this way to Beijing, what he thought about the Falun Gong. The Secretary-General in his response said that he was on his way to China and expected to learn more about the situation.

Upon his arrival in Beijing, I briefed him while we were driving from the airport to his hotel and I suggested to him that if the government wanted it, UNDP could assist in devising a national response which would avoid the brutality which was currently in practice. The Secretary-General picked up this idea and mentioned it to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in his meeting with him. And thus began the most difficult project I had to handle during my entire career.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had chosen as our counterpart a Chinese NGO under its ambit, the Chinese Friendship Association with Foreign Countries. Through them we were brought into contact with the Ministry of Public Security, and especially their internal review department. As could be expected, the association wanted as a first step to undertake an international study tour. While I did not object to such an activity, I insisted that as a first step a seminar should be held during which a number of Chinese and foreign scholars should analyze the origins and social importance of the Falun Gong and similar organizations and assess what might be the best possible response in observance of the human rights of the individuals involved. The Chinese side accepted our counterproposal and in no time organized such a seminar with scientists working on such issues coming from Canada, the US, Japan, Russia and Western Europe.

After we in UNDP saw the final report of the seminar, I agreed to organize the study tour. Yet, I did not clear all visits. In particular, I objected to country visits where I knew that the governments had chosen a very similar hard hitting approach as China. Again, the Chinese side accepted, but asked whether they could include these countries at their own expense in the program of visits. I responded that I would prefer that if they absolutely insisted on visiting these countries they should do so in a separate trip and at their own expense, which they did.

The overall result was that the Ministry of Public Security shifted its emphasis in dealing with Falun Gong members. Rather than to persecute individual members, who were socially marginalized to such an extent that they were willing to defy every restrictions on their public appearance, the police was now focusing instead on those who were encouraging such members to practice their beliefs in public places. These instigators were arrested and tried for the breach of the peace.

Over time, the results of this shift became visible. Public displays, including self immolation declined and then ceased. Government officials reverted back to the policy that what people did in their private homes was none of their concerns. Under the prevailing circumstances reaching the status quo ante was a big achievement.

When we took stock in a wrap up meeting to our project, we concluded that officially recognized social organizations had to respond better to the needs of those who were left behind in the reform process. People who were elderly, marginalized and with limited income, were vulnerable to beliefs that they were left to find their own solutions to their problems, a notion which the teachings of the Falun Gong reinforced. Although our cooperation was not enough to ensure that public authorities throughout China would treat members of the Falun Gong everywhere with the deserving respect of their human rights, we had made an entry into the public security field and were able to address issues of violations of the convention against torture.

I would have liked to pursue the cooperation with regard to the handling of the Falun Gong movement. But due to the official non-recognition of the group by the Chinese authorities, we could not make them part of our project, which would have had to be the case, if we wanted to contribute to a peaceful settlement of their conflict with

the Chinese authorities. We therefore let the matter rest and pursued other avenues to strengthen the human rights protection of Chinese citizens.

Learning a bitter lesson

During this cooperation I learned another lesson which left a bitter taste in my mouth. While UNDP, and especially I, struggled to make a positive contribution in this horrible conflict, my colleagues in the UN community and from diplomatic missions stood by and observed how things were evolving. When after the first seminar a highly critical and misleading article about UNDP's involvement appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, people were taking bets on how long I would remain in post. I later on invited the journalist who had written this article for a conversation, but it remained impossible to convince him and others who were faulting the Chinese authorities for their handling of the matter, that we needed to get involved constructively.²⁰

Not picking up the ball on this issue was in particular counter-productive, as the Ministry of Community Services, which was in charge of registering and monitoring NGOs, became over-cautious and nothing moved any longer on the front of the strengthening of civil society organizations in China. Some eventually registered as businesses in order to step out of their legal limbo situation. A pragmatic solution, but clearly falling short of the requirements of a rapidly changing society, where market forces were creating wealth and goods and services, but also many gaps to a social security network, which let sizeable numbers of Chinese threatened by poverty and social marginalization. Governmental programs and economic growth were not likely to address these emerging needs as effectively as social volunteer organizations would be able to do.

²⁰ What happened was the following: one of the US participants in the seminar had tipped off one of the resident foreign correspondents to UNDP's involvement and had questioned the integrity of our involvement. The correspondent who had specialized in reporting on the Falun Gong picked this criticism up, and gave our contribution to the seminar and the whole project the appearance of uncritically supporting the government's actions. In the aftermath of this article I had to report to the SG's office on what I had done. To my greatest relief word came back from New York that I should continue to undertake such high risk projects, but should in future be more mindful of the reporting by the media.

The bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and its impact on China's foreign policy

China's foreign policy was interested in avoiding major conflicts with other countries, or to be drawn into one. Within the UN, China aligned with the Group of 77, solidarity with developing countries was of immense importance to China. As one of the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council it acted at par with the US, Russia, the UK and France following its own course. With its 14 neighboring countries peaceful relationships were of paramount interest to Beijing. The longest common border China has with Russia. For several years a joint team of Chinese and Russian experts was fixing the common border removing all causes for future border disputes. This was even more important as Chinese traders were pushing into the thinly populated Far East of the Russian Federation and into Mongolia, and local social and economic conflicts could quickly escalate into a border dispute. Furthermore, China was interested in pulling its former allies, namely Laos, Cambodia, Burma (now Myanmar) and North Korea along the path of socialist market reforms. The results of such efforts were quite mixed. But at least the US and other non-Chinese interventions and interests in these countries were kept in check. The relationship with the USA, Japan, the EU countries and Australia were dominated by the Chinese interest to learn from the technological achievements of these countries, and to use them as markets for their products. Chinese leaders were polite and welcoming to visitors from these countries, but culturally and politically they kept their distance. Below the smooth surface always loomed antagonisms which President Jiang Zemin and his team were interested in keeping hidden from public view. This stance was seriously threatened by several events during my residence in China. In particular I recall one event, which could have easily derailed our efforts to strengthen the *rule of law* and the dialogue on the protection of human rights in China: the unfortunate bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the NATO interventions in Serbia. This event showed that while we as the UN development system resident in China were not directly involved in foreign policy matters, they nevertheless affected our work in the country.²¹

²¹ Foreign policy matters were handled in New York by the UN secretariat via China's permanent representative in New York and through annual consultations of the UN Secretary-General in Beijing.

The bombing had occurred on a Friday, the news hit China on Saturday, and on Sunday there were massive demonstrations around the area of the US embassy in Beijing. I had at the time a friend visiting from New York and we had been out of town hiking and sightseeing in the mountains around Beijing. My residence was far away from the US embassy and as we drove back we also did not have to pass the area where the demonstrations occurred. When a colleague telephoned me to enquire what they should do, as they could neither leave nor enter their diplomatic compound, I was taken by total surprise. I immediately called some other colleagues and organized a support system for those who were closed in or shut out. I also send an e-mail to all staff asking them to stay calm and avoid if at all possible the area where the demonstrations were taking place. In the process I learned that some junior international staff had joined the demonstrators partly out of curiosity, partly out of indignation over the bombing. I thus also had to call the supervisors of these staff and requested that they ensure that no such participation by UN staff would continue. Still, it was, of course, interesting to have some firsthand accounts from inside the demonstrating crowd. The reports were unanimous: while there were a few demonstrators who wanted to turn this into a xenophobic event, the vast majority was against this. A foreign correspondent was attacked by some people in the crowd, but was quickly protected by a much larger group of demonstrators. By all eye witness accounts, the crowd was peaceful and stayed focused on expressing their anger over the bombing of the embassy. The police stayed in the background and after a few days the demonstrations ended.

However, the debate in the Chinese media over whether the opening up policy should be continued, and whether Chinese were safe overseas was so intense that we in the UN community became worried that a major policy shift might be caused by the incidence. We were aware that there were conservative forces which preferred to revert to a more isolationist policy. We had made this concern one of the three themes for our UNDAF for the five year period 2000–2005. I felt that we needed to become more proactive and I asked for an appointment with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss the future of our cooperation, especially with regard to the human rights agenda. As the Ministry was coordinating all these dialogues and activities, their reaction would be a tell-tale sign of what was happening inside the Chinese system.

The immediate reaction of the high-ranking official I met was one of hesitation. In fact, from his probing questions to me I could see that the final outcome of the debate inside the Chinese administration was not yet certain. I therefore was very clear in my responses, arguing strongly in favor of continuing the dialogue and cooperation and to treat the incidence in Belgrade as a singular event being subject to further investigations and clarifications. President Clinton's initial reaction which made light of the damage to the Chinese embassy and the death of Chinese staff members did not exactly help. But eventually he did apologize to the Chinese government, although quite belatedly. After a few anxious weeks, it was apparent that the views which advocated a continuation of the reform policies had won the debate, but mistrust had slipped into the relations vis-à-vis the Western countries, which had been there latently all along, but was now visible.

The Belgrade incident provoked a clear shift in China's foreign policy. An old concept from the Mao era reemerged. Since the late 1950s and until Mao's death, China followed a policy of contradicting the Soviet Union. It almost blindly supported those governments of which the Soviet Union was critical. A similar policy was now practiced with regard to the foreign policy of the US and Western Europe. For instance, China defied the sanctions against the regime of Slobodan Milosevic and traded openly and actively with Serbia. China was beginning to make its presence felt politically around the world and by showing its flag in opposition to the US and other major powers. At the same time, they almost "forgot" about the Belgrade bombing. Once the bodies of those who had been killed had been brought back to Beijing and had been buried in a special ceremony, there was no further public mention of the incident. The silence about it was almost scarier than the intensive debate before.

Staying informed – media coverage and their gaps

Being in China means to ferociously seek information about China from as many sources as possible. It means reading the Chinese English language press, listening to Chinese colleagues and friends about what was reported in the Chinese media, watching the English program of CCTV, reading books and magazine articles with personal accounts of the recent history and, of course, following what the fo-

reign press and media report on China. The difference between the national and international media in emphasis and selection of what was newsworthy were enormous.

Either media coverage did not coincide with our experience, insights and understanding of what was happening in China. While the national media would invariably write in a positive tone, even when they reported on some critical incidences or situations, the foreign press would almost invariably strike a negative and critical tone, often missing the larger picture with all its contradictions. Half jokingly, half in desperation, I repeatedly said to foreign correspondents: “You live in a different China than I!” Interestingly they often replied: “No, our perception is pretty similar to yours. But back home our editor wants certain stories, and not necessarily what we want to report on.”

After I had heard that response just one time too often, I asked for an appointment with the minister in charge of the State Council Information Office. A new minister had just been appointed and I disguised my request as a courtesy call. Apart from asking for his help in distributing some information from the UN in Chinese, I also expressed the view that reporting of foreign media about China is often misleading. In this context I raised the frequent arrests and intimidations of foreign correspondents by local authorities which obviously soured the relations and caused several correspondents to burn out over these harassments. I knew of several cases where foreign journalists had asked to be transferred—leaving China with a bitter memory.

As a possible solution I suggested to reach out to the editors of major international new media in order to sensitize them to the reports which their correspondents wanted to prepare and see published. The minister listened politely and thanked me for my concern. He let me go with a request for UN help to control the content which was distributed on the Internet. The latter I politely declined because I was not interested in getting involved in such a sensitive subject. Somehow I assumed that as I had declined any follow-up to this conversation, he would consider our meeting a nice chat without any consequences.

But I was quite mistaken. A few weeks later I heard that the editors-in-chief of several influential Western daily and weekly newspapers had been invited by Tsinghua University to a seminar to discuss with their

Chinese counterparts the challenges of reporting on foreign countries, and in particular on China. Whether this was a direct outcome of my meeting with Minister Zhao Qisheng, or it had been planned independently, I don't know. But the results were quite stunning. For at least some months, international reporting on China was more balanced and centered on real life in the country rather than influenced by foreign demands on China to be more democratic, more human rights-oriented, and more Western in its approach. In other words, reports were more differentiated and analytical, throwing light on events as they occurred instead of paying homage to a perceived Western public opinion.

North Korean asylum seekers – protecting human rights or maintaining good neighborly relations

Over time, the foreign media reverted back to their “interventionist” style. This became especially apparent, when a wave of North Koreans entered international and diplomatic premises requesting asylum. These North Koreans had slipped into China across the border and were living under trying social and economic conditions in Beijing and other Chinese cities. They always were in fear of the detection of their illegal presence by the police which would lead to their deportation back to North Korea.

These refugees had come to China and to Beijing for many years. The Chinese authorities took the attitude that as long as they did not make any noise or attracted any attention, they would close their eyes to the presence of these “illegal immigrants”. But the situation changed dramatically in 2002. Individual North Koreans climbed over walls or found other access to diplomatic compounds requesting asylum. It put both the Chinese authorities as well as these embassies in a bind. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not want to have a conflict with the North Korean government over these refugees. The foreign diplomats did not want to deliver these asylum seekers to the Chinese authorities as they feared that China would return them to North Korea, where they would face severe punishment. But the concerned embassies were also not interested in flying these asylum seekers out to their respective countries. It was not clear what the North Korean refugees wanted. After intensive negotiations between the local diplomats, my colleagues from UNHCR and the Chinese Ministry of For-

eign Affairs developed a practice that South Korea would signal their acceptance of these refugees—provided they would enter South Korea via a third country. Therefore, flights and transits had to be arranged via the Philippines, Hong Kong or other transit points.

Of course, as these incidents became more frequent, the diplomats became more interested in understanding the process by which these refugees all of a sudden began to jump over their walls. What transpired was not a pretty picture. Most of these refugees had been talked into their action with dubious promises by some international NGOs, and several foreign journalists were working together with these NGOs to give the “escapes” the highest possible visibility.

The plight of these North Korean “illegal immigrants” was undoubtedly horrible. The information we had about the “underground railroad” through Central Asia and Russia to Western Europe and how some of these migrants were treated along the way were indeed appalling. We in the UN did as much as we could to impress on the Chinese authorities that in view of their commitments to international conventions they had to protect the human rights of these refugees once they had entered China. The Chinese government on their side argued that they were interested in keeping their dialogue with the North Korean leadership open and did not want this dialogue interrupted over the fate and treatment of the refugees. According to our contact points in the central government, the local authorities were advised to tolerate these refugees with due respect to their rights and safety. However, as soon as the immigrants became known to the police for whatever reason, they would be brought to the border and sent back.²²

The organizers and sympathizers of these individual actions wanted to bring down the North Korean regime through organized massive emigration (similar to the exodus occurring in East Germany just prior to the fall of the wall). But history does not repeat itself, and therefore these incidents remained what they were: singular and without much effect one way or the other on the overall situation in North Korea and the views and positions of their neighboring countries. In the end,

22 Given the precarious economic situation of most of these refugees, some of them made a living through prostitution (which was illegal in China), trafficking of all kinds, including women and children. Therefore, there were occasions on which the public security would stumble on these North Koreans in China and would send them back to their country of origin with no delay.

these refugees willing to “escape” from China were used for political actions, which they not necessarily fully subscribed to. Initially, the Chinese government and foreign diplomatic missions in Beijing were put into an embarrassing situation. In the end, handling of these cases became a well-established routine, and they were no longer front page or evening TV news.

We in the UN had no interest to be drawn into this scheme. While I consulted with my other UN agency colleagues, especially my colleague from UNHCR²³, how to handle a situation should it arise, I spread the word informally through the foreign press corps in Beijing that the UN compound was rented from the Chinese government and thus we were not in the same position as embassies to provide safe passage to refugees. Whether this did the trick, I do not know, but at least we had no refugees on UN premises except once at the very beginning of these events, when a group entered the UNHCR offices.

As more groups of refugees took refuge in several embassies, the Chinese increased the security measures around our compound manifold. There were barbed wire fences, plenty of plain cloth policemen, and one more control of identity papers before a Chinese could enter the UN compound. I was furious and went to complain to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I told them that people were starting to believe that we had problems with the Chinese government as these controls were unnecessarily hindering bona fide visitors from entering our premises for meetings and discussions. I also pointed out that this meant a slowdown in our programs which after all were to the benefit of China. I called one of the UN field security advisors to come and inspect our premises and to make recommendations how the security could be improved. I shared these recommendations with our landlord, a company which belonged to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They judged the proposed measures to be too costly. Therefore, adjustments were made in the typical pragmatic way of the Chinese: they agreed to the installation of a gate opening device via remote control replacing manual operation by the security guards. The barbed wire fence was removed and instead barbed wire was installed on top of the

²³ The representative of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees had to deal with the first such group taking refuge in the premises of his office, and arranged to fly them out after swift negotiations with the Chinese authorities.

wall around our premises. All plain cloth policemen were withdrawn. Instead, the whole road leading to our office and other embassies was blocked to normal traffic. People wanting to pass through had to show their identity cards at the intersection with the Third Ring Road. The latter was actually a blessing in disguise. My apartment faced this road, and it became much quieter and pleasant as only pedestrians and bicyclists were able to use the street. Even the prostitutes, who had been standing there before, relocated to other streets.

The handling of this refugee situation showed once more that at the higher level in the government, matters were dealt with in a well-balanced way, satisfying the interests of all involved. At the local level, however, the response was heavy-handed and restricted the freedom of movement of the residents.

Promoting regional cooperation in North East Asia and Central Asia

UNDP was dealing with the fate of these North Koreans in China in a different way. For more than 10 years, UNDP was funding an initiative which was aimed at enhancing economic cooperation among the Northeast Asian countries.²⁴ In the early 1990s, we had chosen the Tumen River area where China, Russia and North Korea had common borders as the core territory for such economic cooperation. Originally, a common free trade and processing zone was to be established, but instead each country established their own, and only the Chinese one near Hunjun took off with mostly investments from South Korea. There was a lot of interest in the Rajin-Sonbong district in North Korea, but the government in Pyongyang was putting as many obstacles in the way of potential investors as they could possibly come up with. They wanted to develop a zone across from the South Korean border and close to the DPRK capital Pyongyang rather than turning it in what they considered a remote area. The Chinese were interested in the harbor of Rajin, as it was ice-free during the winter and geographically for them at the shortest distance to the Pacific Ocean for many locations in Northeast China. But even in China not all the concerned provinces were agreed on this, as they were quite satisfied with using Dalian or even Tianjin as their port. Only Mongolia as a landlocked country

²⁴ The countries are China, Russia, the two Koreas, Japan and Mongolia.

was interested in having more than the established routes via Vladivostok and Tianjin respectively, but the volume of its trade was not sufficient to pull matters in favor of Rajin and the Tumen area.

The Tumen program was quite a frustrating experience in terms of developmental success. However, politically it was fascinating. On the one hand, it offered a venue for the six countries to come together at least twice a year to exchange views and positions. We could see at each meeting how the relationships between the six countries ebbed and flowed. At one meeting, which the Hong Kong authorities hosted and to which several interested investors came, the North Korean delegation did not show up—similar to a meeting in Ulan Bator, after the North Korean government had cut diplomatic ties with Mongolia. At another meeting in Vladivostok, all countries participated at the ministerial level, but no potential investors came, and the Minister from Moscow came only at the last minute. While at times the participating delegations were reluctant to assume the full responsibility for conducting the meetings, at others they assumed this function without any hesitation. But in the end, all countries agreed that there should be more economic cooperation in Northeast Asia, but none seemed to be willing to overcome the limitations of their national foreign policies. While they watched with a certain curiosity the evolution of the European Union and of ASEAN, they just could not see a way forward for themselves in spite of the opportunities which were staring them in the face. Russia had excess electricity in its Far Eastern region and still a functioning infrastructure which needed relatively little upgrading to export such energy to Japan and South Korea. North Korea as a potential transit country could benefit through the collection of transit fees and even as a client. North Korea's desperate economic situation was largely caused by a severe shortage of energy. What is less well-known is that the situation took crisis dimensions when Russia abruptly cut the country off from subsidized electricity supplies in the early 1990s, and neither Moscow nor Pyongyang knew how to negotiate a solution which would keep the energy flowing albeit at an increased cost to the North Korean economy.

Since then, North Korea's economic and social fabric was deteriorating and its political leaders were incapable of halting the trend. What had started off as an energy crisis had developed into a situation of

widespread hunger and of steeply declining living standards. A political elite which had been comfortably ensconced during the decades prior to 1989, was increasingly fighting a losing battle against the changes of the time, and alienating in this process its former allies without making new ones. While our colleagues from UNICEF, UNFPA and WFP were documenting the incredible decline in the health status of the population, nobody seemed to find the key to unlock the door giving access to the political leaders in North Korea. President Kim Dae Jong in South Korea who seemed to have found it, had later to admit that he had more or less bought his way to a meeting with Kim Jong Il without being able to show that the funds had been used for an improvement of the living conditions of the population in the North.

DPRK and its leadership isolated itself more and more from the international community and the observance of established rules and political practices. Instead, they were reportedly using some questionable ones which bordered on criminal activity. As a result the situation steadily declined into one where military security considerations became predominant.

When I left China in mid-2003, I thought that politically China and South Korea were best placed to keep the dialogue going, while economically Russia and Japan held the key to unlock North Korea's potential. The US, while understandably concerned and involved in the political development of the Korean peninsula since the early 1950s, was interested in taking a back seat and in withdrawing from visibility in this conflict. But DPRK leaders were not interested in negotiating its future with its neighbors—rather they insisted on negotiating directly with the US government. The best the rest of the world, especially the EU and the US, can do under the circumstances, is to fund rewards for those moves which take the development into the direction of peaceful cooperation. Regrettably the world has no other effective non-military means at its disposal to bring DPRK back into the international community of nations. While the UN can serve as mediator when the process gets stuck, they too are dependent on the good will of all parties to find acceptable solutions.²⁵

²⁵ It is interesting to see that since the current SG Ban Ki-Moon took office, the dialogue between DPRK and the other five interested countries has resumed and might finally bring some results. Although the involvement of the 38th floor in the UN secretariat is not made public, it is curious that so soon after the new SG was in office there has been a change in the political climate in Northeast Asia.

Moves in this direction were urgent, given the deterioration in the health and well-being of the North Korean population. The decline in their physical, mental and intellectual capabilities will not be reversed easily and quickly. It will most likely take another generation or approximately 30 years to raise the level of human development in North Korea to the level which the country had attained towards the end of the 1980s. It is a grim situation which deserves more attention of the international community than the one given to the idiosyncrasies of North Korean leaders.

It is not even obvious where the entry point into a new approach lies, which will overcome the current mistrust, anger, despair and sarcasm. I made a small attempt with the North Korean ambassador in Beijing, with whom I advocated for closer economic cooperation among the Northeast Asian countries under the umbrella of the Tumen program, which would halt and possibly reverse the deterioration of the economic situation and in the longer run would lead to political recognition. The ambassador, quite arrogantly responded: "Political recognition had to come first. They would rather die than not being properly recognized."

Tumen, however, was not our only regional program. Another one, similarly ambitious, was our Silk Road program which aimed at closer economic cooperation between China and the Central Asian countries, creating another more Southern land bridge between Northeast Asia and Europe than the link via the Trans Siberian railroad through Russia. Interest by the concerned countries was strong, and Japan and South Korea were willing to fund some of the necessary infrastructure investments through the Asian Development Bank. China for domestic reasons was already giving greater attention to infrastructure improvements in the Western provinces, and it was looking for opportunities to amortize these investments through more international trade and economic ties with countries on its North Western border. Russia, quite understandably, was viewing these discussions and plans with great suspicion. Yet, that these discussions took place at all, forced Moscow to pay greater attention to its internal links with its Far Eastern region. Conventional economic wisdom was that the markets were too small to justify several routes from Asia to Europe over land, although they had existed over centuries. Since the late 19th century, the more Northern rail link from Vladivostok to Moscow via

Irkutsk had dominated the East-West overland connection. Nevertheless, the political interest among some of the Central Asian countries and China was strong enough to use improvements in the road infrastructure and the facilitation of cross-border trade among them as a stimulus for further economic growth in this part of Asia. If in addition, trade to and from European countries could also increase, then this was considered an added bonus.

Revival of the Silk Road

In 2002, I was invited to speak about our program at the Central Asian Economic Forum, held in Almaty. I was invited to participate in a panel together with the Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan. As the most prominent panelist he was understandably attracting most of the questions and comments during the discussion from the audience. Yet after the session I received a lot of interest expressed in our program by business representatives from Scandinavia and South East Asia respectively.

The main purpose of our cooperation program was to bring the countries along the proposed new Silk Road to harmonize their customs and transit procedures for goods and for tourists and to improve the road, hotel and other infrastructure along the proposed corridor. Several inter-governmental meetings, multi-stakeholder conferences and technical expert workshops had been funded by us to lay the ground for the needed political decisions which in the absence of a regional organization had to be taken by each participating country respectively. The harmonization and simplification of border controls proved, however, to be of low priority in some of the participating countries and thus progress was slow. Customs duties are an important source of public revenue in these countries, and governments were afraid that a simplification might lead to an erosion of this income source.

I never warmed to this program. While I could see the economic and cultural importance of easier transit through Central Asia from China to Western Europe, I also knew that the Central Asian countries had problems at their hands like the social instability in the Fergana Valley, which led to political tension between three of the countries, namely Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan which were indispensable for the success of this program. The assumption that a

freer flow of trade and tourists would overcome these tensions appeared farfetched. I therefore had low expectations of this program, in spite of the justified need and wish to foster more economic development in those countries.

On my way back, I decided to travel overland from Almaty to Xinjiang in China in order to experience firsthand the border crossing between Kazakhstan and China. Indeed I got a glimpse of the inability of the border personnel to process expeditiously exit and entry formalities. Although I had a diplomatic visa, and I was delivered by UN staff on one side of the border and picked up by local Chinese officials on the other, it still took forever to get through the controls. There were no other travelers either who would have justified the delay. Interestingly enough, as I finally had my Kazakh exit stamp, the border control, a female officer, wished me a safe journey in German. I was so surprised that I turned back and asked her where she had learned to speak German. She told me that she had been trained in the German Democratic Republic.

Tibet – one more attempt to promote sensible development for the Tibetans

In November 2001, I also returned once more to Tibet. We had launched a series of poverty alleviation projects which needed urgently additional funds in order to develop their full potential. Together with the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Cooperation in Beijing and the Tibet government we wanted to organize a donor conference for Tibet. The purpose of my visit therefore was to convince the authorities in the Tibet Autonomous Region to cooperate and to host such a conference. They agreed, but insisted that the conference should take place in Beijing. We therefore only discussed the agenda of the conference and our respective role. Dates and logistics could be left to further discussions in Beijing.

When the conference took place in January 2002, it was a rousing success. For the first time, the Beijing donor and diplomatic representatives experienced a conference which was devoid of all the known rancor and prejudices and was in a frank and open manner discussing the development challenges of the Tibetan population in the Autonomous Region.

Some months prior to the donor conference in Beijing, the Danish government had invited me to participate in a consultation which the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was holding in Copenhagen regarding future Danish assistance to Tibet. The Danish government had come under a lot of pressure by groups advocating for more development assistance to Tibet, and the Danish officials wanted to hear how other organizations were assisting the Tibetan population. The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs had funds under a human rights budgetary allocation, but the responsible officers were not sure what to support and how to go about it. Therefore, they had invited not only me, but also representatives of NGOs which were active in Tibet. While I emphasized the deeply religious roots of the Tibetan culture, I also mentioned the prevailing backwardness and poverty, in particular in the rural areas. As a process of self determined development was crucially important, I advised the Danish hosts to invest in primary education. Tibet was in terms of social indicators last among the Chinese provinces and territories, and without a better educational level of young Tibetans, they would be left behind or overrun by Chinese initiatives and drive. Others in the consultation agreed with this view, and we left this meeting with a sense of having accomplished something.²⁶

The next day a group of NGOs had invited me together with the other representatives who had come from China to participate in the previous day's consultation to a conference discussing development in Tibet. Initially, I was reluctant to attend. I knew that NGOs from all over Scandinavia would be attending the conference. These NGOs were known for their heavy and somewhat one-sided criticism of the Chinese policy regarding Tibet, without any attempt to identify possible alternatives. They contributed to the widespread reaction of Tibetans to withdraw from all Chinese efforts to modernize the Tibetan economy and society. The Chinese had indeed often shown little understanding or respect for the Tibetan culture, and most Chinese could not comprehend the importance of religious beliefs and practices in the daily life of Tibetans. The withdrawal of Tibetans from the Chinese development efforts, however, led and leads

²⁶ Later on, the Danish government did indeed give assistance for the primary school system in Tibet.

to the undesirable situation that modernization is equated by many Tibetans (and those who are supporting their cause) with the desire of the Chinese to wipe out the Tibetan culture. I had met during my trips to Tibet several officials of Chinese and Tibetan origin who were genuinely wishing for a more balanced development. But these officials had a hard time to convince on the one hand the population of Tibet and on the other hand to keep the Communist hardliners and security forces at bay.

While I was not in full agreement with the views and positions of the inviting NGOs, I did not want to give the impression that the UN in China was not willing to listen and talk to them, and I went to the conference. As I could quickly notice, the representatives of the NGOs were quite uncomfortable with my presence, and I was wondering how the day might end.

The opening keynote speech was given by a representative of a London-based NGO. As I had anticipated the speaker was heavily criticizing the Chinese authorities and was castigating Beijing over the construction of the railway line from Qinghai to Lhasa. At the first opportunity I raised my hand, introduced myself and said that no matter, how much we would criticize this railway construction, it would proceed and be completed. Consequently, it was more important to make demands and suggestions how this link could benefit the local population, and not just interested parties from outside Tibet. I also mentioned that we in the UN in China were very concerned about the reaction of many Tibetans living along the path of the railway. Instead of seizing the economic opportunities the railway construction offered, they were moving further inland, leaving the reaping of benefits to others, mostly to Chinese traders and businesses.

Initially, there was no reaction to my intervention and I was about to leave the conference, when a representative of the Dalai Lama took the floor. He said that he was authorized to say that investments which were improving the living standards of the Tibetan population were welcomed by the Dalai Lama. His statement turned the mood and the discussions took a different direction from there onward. In fact, later in the day, a member of a Tibetan NGO which was working with Tibetan farmers in India said, almost in exasperation, that they

preferred to all the talk about human rights that Tibetan farmers were taught how to raise their yaks in the most productive way.

During coffee breaks, several of the participants came up to me and asked how they might get an opportunity to visit Tibet. They had left Tibet after 1957, been taken in by families in Scandinavian countries, who raised them and send them to school and universities. Now they were working for NGOs dealing with Tibet, but without any direct contacts. I enquired whether they ever had requested a visa from a Chinese embassy, which they had not.

Upon my return to Beijing I called on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and relayed the results of these consultations. Among others, I also mentioned the enquiries about visits to Tibet by Tibetans living abroad. A few weeks later I read in the newspaper *China Daily* that all Chinese embassies were advised by the Ministry to advertise the procedures of obtaining a visa/permit for a visit to Tibet and to process requests with due consideration and without delays.

I took the opportunity of my second stay to visit another part of Tibet. The first time I had been to the Southern part towards Mount Qomolangma (Mount Everest) and later to Naqu in the North. This time I turned east towards the more developed part bordering on Sichuan to the East and India and Bhutan to the South. Although it was early November, the weather was still pleasant and the autumn colors were in full display. I had asked to see as much as possible of the religious institutions and practices in Tibet. To my surprise, there was no opposition to this request. I was offered to meet with a living Buddha and to stop at any monastery of my choosing. I had a most animated discussion with the living Buddha about the development challenges of Tibet. I also was invited by a Tibetan family to enter their house and was asked by them what they might be able to do against the failing eyesight of one of the elderly women in the family.

On my way back to Lhasa I saw local pilgrims obviously observing Bon religious rites.²⁷ Arriving in Lhasa, we were held up by a procession of Tibetans from all walks of life cirambulating the city in celebration of a high Buddhist holiday. Repeatedly, I got a first-hand

²⁷ The Bon religion preceded Lamaism in Tibet, it is a pre-Buddhist religion.

impression of the religious practices and beliefs of Tibetans living in Tibet today. The difference to the Chinese culture is striking. In essence, the Chinese culture is based on secular values and beliefs, using age old rituals to give daily life spiritual meaning. By contrast Tibetan life is imbued with religious beliefs, practices, and rituals which organize their daily life. Even those Tibetans, who were engaged in modern jobs and might not consider that they were deeply religious, were observing such rituals.

In my admittedly limited experience, I did not get the impression that the Chinese immigrant population and the Tibetan population were living in a constant fight. But they clearly were living alongside each other without much understanding of what made the other tick. They were tolerating each other with benign neglect, but obviously such peaceful co-existence could very quickly deteriorate, because the priority of each segment of the population was very different. Chinese work very hard to get rich, Tibetans work to afford a decent life, which includes observing religious customs. They want the return of the Dalai Lama and a self determined government neither of which the Chinese government is likely to agree to in the foreseeable future. The political situation is deadlocked, and unless there is another overriding concern or interest to overcome the present stalemate, the only way forward for anyone wishing to work in Tibet and improving the lot of the Tibetan people is to focus attention on an equally distributed development—respecting the culture of Tibet.

Just before I left, I explored the possibility of working with monks and nuns in such a way that their monasteries would become centers of excellence for the modernization of the Tibetan society. I spoke to the living Buddha about this, and he was very receptive as was the representative of the United Front in Tibet. The United Front is a subsidiary of the Communist Party in charge of managing relations with civil society and religious organizations. Since the flight of the Dalai Lama all important monasteries had set up a monastery in Dharamsala, where the theological debates were conducted. Scholarly life in the parent sites had almost ceased. Giving these monasteries a social, economic and cultural role, which would go beyond their daily prayers and occupations, could thus become a stabilizing factor. It could strengthen the still uneasy truce between the monks and nuns and the

Communist Party and administration of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Regrettably, I could not pursue this idea before my final departure from China, and my successor did not pick it up. Reaching out to civil society organizations Tibet and the fate of other national minorities continued to preoccupy us in our work in UNDP. After the National Human Development Report of 1999 on the topic of “Transition and the State” had been published, I not only was interested in reaching out to the NGO community, but also to the business sector, both foreign companies with known Corporate Social Responsibility programs as well as Chinese companies and entrepreneurs with social commitments. It was quite obvious that such cooperation had to be around specific issues in order to get off the ground. After a first round of contacts, we decided to choose a) anti-corruption, b) HIV/AIDS, and c) social equity as topics. On the first one, we funded a study which was carried out by well-known Chinese social scientists on existing anti-corruption measures taken by Chinese governmental authorities and the business sector. With regard to the second topic, we were interested in building a civil alliance in a country where the government was not willing to face the impending epidemic (I shall come back to this later). On the third topic we stumbled more or less on an opportunity, because nobody else was willing to seize it.

For our outreach to the business sector, I employed a method which had served us well in UNDP when we established contact to non-traditional partners.²⁸ We selected a group of potential partners, representatives of foreign companies known for their corporate social responsibility program, chambers of commerce of Chinese and foreign companies and senior executives of important Chinese companies. After a series of personal contacts, I invited them to a round table discussion in our office with no set agenda, in order to allow for a free flowing discussion about concerns, interest and ideas. Two topics emerged, one the apparent lack of transparency with regard to China’s labor laws and their application, and the other: corruption. With regard to the former, we organized a meeting in which senior officials from the International Labor Organization (ILO), the Ministry of

²⁸ For instance, when in Malawi I organized round table discussions between representatives of the government and the private sector. See chapter 4.

Labor and the Chinese trade unions briefed business representatives on the existing legislation and plans for future changes. I can't say that this meeting was one of the most productive we ever held. In particular, the representatives of the trade unions were still caught in a very old fashioned style and not saying much of any particular relevance to the interest of the audience and speaking for far too long. Fortunately, the representative of the Ministry of Labor was more forthcoming; otherwise the meeting would have flopped. This would have been embarrassing as we had asked for a contribution from the participating business representatives towards defraying the costs for the ILO colleague whom we had flown in from Bangkok for this meeting.

However, the trade unionists were so grateful for our initiative that it led to a project in which we supported them to tackle their obligations vis-à-vis workers who had been laid off as a result of the reforms. These workers had remained unemployed and unemployable in the emerging new industrial and commercial structures and enterprises. My predecessor had already accepted a project in Tianjin where we assisted the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) to support laid-off women workers to get back into gainful employment or self-employment. Through a variety of measures such as micro-credits, business advice, training and support through a business incubator, it had been possible to get a sizeable number of women workers economically back on their feet. Our program had enabled them to support their families, after, in a second wave of layoffs, husbands had lost their jobs, too.

The All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) was very interested to learn and benefit from this experience in provinces and towns where one state owned enterprise was dominating the local economy and through their layoffs was driving whole communities into poverty. The trade union leadership felt morally obliged to care for these workers who had been members of the unions for decades and were now left in the cold. Neither the former employer nor the local authorities were willing to assist these workers in finding alternative ways to make a living. The Tianjin experience could not be copied in a cookie-cutter fashion, but elements of the approach and the experience were helpful to get similar schemes off the ground in Xiamen/Fujian and in Henan province.

Of greater concern to the foreign business community was the copying of foreign products by Chinese companies in contravention of international patent and copyright protection. Each and every foreign political leader who visited China was briefed on this issue and raised it with the Prime Minister and the President. Both responded that China had passed the required legislation and that it was now up to market forces for businesses to work in compliance with these legally binding rules. Either side knew that this was not the case. But nobody knew how to fix it either, or how at least to make observance of the Chinese law a more common practice.

In UNDP we knew that Chinese businessmen did not just steal designs and make copies of products with well-established trademarks because they were dishonest. They did it, because they did not understand the internationally accepted regulations through which intellectual property was protected by patents and licenses. In a somewhat simplified way, we realized that in the Chinese tradition good products are there to be copied and then improved upon. They are considered a common good and not a privately owned property. Therefore, we needed to better understand the dynamics of this copying and infringement of existing international and national laws and regulations in order to develop a response which would make these Chinese businessmen and–women see how to respect the protection of intellectual property and still succeed commercially.

We found two researchers at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences who had studied local practices, mostly in Southern China. We engaged these researchers and commissioned a study which we were prepared to share with the foreign business community upon completion. Our understanding with the foreign business community was that, if the study produced new insights into the problem, we would develop a training package for Chinese businesses. We agreed that UNDP funded the initial study. If the outcome of the study justified the development of a training package and the engagement of trainers, then the foreign Chambers of Commerce would fund the development, while the training would be carried out by the Chinese Enterprises Association (the quasi federation of Chinese businesses and employers). The overall oversight remained with UNDP.

We had asked the researchers in our terms of reference for their study to look not only at punitive actions, but also at rewards for those businesses which complied with trade mark protection rules. Furthermore, we had asked them to identify the origins of the successful measures and, of course, their effectiveness. The results were stunning, not only for us, but equally for the researchers whom we had guided to look for aspects which they had overlooked in the past. The most surprised, however, were the representatives of the foreign business community, who had, by their own admission, never really believed in what UNDP had said at the beginning of the study, namely that there were effective ways and means by which the Chinese business community could be held to internationally acceptable standards of trade mark protection. The researchers had gone to two Southern Chinese coastal cities, where businesses had been known for copying frequently trade mark protected goods, but had recorded noticeable improvements over the last few years. What they found was that the local businesses had emulated a traditional form of self government through the formation of associations of businesses producing the same goods.²⁹ The associations had enforced the observance of trade protection rules, and punished those who had violated these rules. The examples the researchers had found were striking in their effectiveness without reverting to political or legal action.

The project thus proceeded to its second stage, the development of training packages and the roll out of a training program, for which the various chambers of commerce in Beijing gave us the necessary funding. We had hit a win-win solution, and we had given the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Cooperation, which was in the final stages of negotiating China's entry into WTO, a bit of a respite from unrelenting criticisms and pressure to do more for intellectual property protection in China.

But we also realized that in order for our program to have an impact, we needed to have a much greater capacity to reach the hundred thousands of Chinese businesses. Slowly, the sheer size of China and the incredibly high numbers of people as a target group became clear.

²⁹ In imperial China, businessmen and merchants were organized in guilds and associations to advance their common interest, but also to ensure that all members were observant of the same set of rules.

The longer I stayed and worked in China, the more I saw the openness and willingness of the national leadership to achieve comprehensive changes. At the same time I became aware that for such comprehensive changes to occur, which were equal to a paradigm shift, a vast number of knowledgeable trainers and financial resources were necessary, which neither the government nor any number of business alliances were able to mobilize. In fact, even if one factored in telecommunications technologies to reach a relevant number of those in charge would take years and a herculean effort. In the field of primary school teacher education several donors and private foundations were assisting the government, but the results were slow in coming. China's potential for reforms on the one side, and the often negative resultant consequences of the current reform efforts on the other began to weigh on my mind. But before it became time to leave, a few more initiatives were in the making.

During one of our exploratory round tables with the private sector, a foreign company of the energy sector had approached me and enquired whether UNDP could help to undertake a social impact assessment of the West East pipeline project which they were considering to join as part of a larger Chinese-foreign consortium. Their company's internal rules demanded that a social and ecological assessment had to be undertaken before they could enter into an agreement with the Chinese government and companies. The ecological part had been finished, but the social assessment part was still to be done, and the management of the company had difficulties in finding a suitable institution to carry out such an assessment which they were willing to fund.

UNDP had been instrumental in developing Chinese legislation which made an environmental impact assessment mandatory for all major infrastructure projects. The application of that law was spotty, but at least it existed. We were now interested in developing similar legislation with regard to social impact assessments. The ever increasing number of social unrest in China around the allocation of farm land for non-agricultural use and the inadequate provision of compensation to farmers when their land was seized made such legislation imperative and urgent. We therefore agreed to undertake the study on the understanding that we would have the intellectual leadership and would carry it out in cooperation with the National Statistics Bu-

reau (NSB). In particular, our second condition raised eyebrows by our private sector sponsor, but I knew that only the NSB would be able to receive the necessary permits for a survey and that they would be able to mobilize the needed survey takers to go from household to household and conduct the interviews on the basis of a questionnaire which our staff was developing. I knew from previous occasions that the NSB was a highly professional institution which would not pre-judge any results of our survey. They might not give us the permission to publish it, but we decided to take it one step at a time.

I had as a policy advisor a visiting economics professor from Harvard University who had extensive experience with developing the needed questionnaire and to discuss and agree with the staff of the NSB on all other details. They in turn were delighted to have a professional partnership which was free of charge to them. Furthermore, our project would be dealing with aspects which they had not been able to cover so far in the context of the population census or the national household survey.

The proposed pipeline would pump natural gas from the Taklimakan desert in Xinjiang province to Shanghai. Immediate economic benefits would accrue to the Chinese company leading the consortium, to the province from where the gas was coming (through increased tax revenue) and to Shanghai, which would receive access to a cheap energy source. The purpose of our survey was to enquire from the population along the pipeline what they expected for them as a return on this investment. The path of the pipeline was running through some of the poorest counties in China with a high percentage of national minorities. Socially this was a highly sensitive project, and parts of the central government were less than interested in our survey, as they feared a delay for the overall project. However, as the foreign companies made the survey a pre-condition of their participation in the investment project, the Chinese authorities with great reluctance relented, partly because they trusted UNDP and partly because they felt that they could still control the survey through the NSB.

We began the survey with exceptional support from the NSB and from most of the local authorities. Our greatest problem were NGOs in Europe who were accusing us of having “been bought” by private sector interests and suspecting that no survey in China would produce

any reliable results, especially in ethnic minority areas. Local UNDP staff was helpless in dealing with these very aggressively formulated criticisms which reached us via e-mail incessantly. I therefore had to take personally care of phrasing our responses to these e-mails. While I do not believe we convinced our critics that this undertaking was well justified and carried with professional integrity, over time their language became less accusatory and was based on facts rather than suspicions. For UNDP these exchanges were a pain, but also helpful. We gained a better idea about the handling of the results of the survey once they were available. Not only did we insist that the results should be published in both Chinese and English, but also in Uyghur. We even prevailed with the posting of the full report on our website for anyone to read.

The survey became a seminal work. The NSB was grateful to us for persevering against some strong opposition in the State Reform and Development Commission, the supervisory authority of the NSB, the senior managers of the foreign company were grateful that we had assisted them to meet their own internal requirements, and I was satisfied that UNDP developed a model methodology for social impact assessments in China. Furthermore, I was glad to show that relatively little had to be done to meet the expectations and demands of the poor local communities along the path of the pipeline. According to the calculations of our experts some 1 percent of the total investment sum would be sufficient to meet immediate economic needs of the local communities. If the best approaches of poverty alleviation were applied it was well possible to set economic dynamics in motion in these localities which would improve the living conditions in all of the 58 counties along the pipeline. What was needed was some foresight and concern for those who were otherwise bypassed.

The foreign company later on decided not to join the Chinese companies in this project. Consequently, further work to address the social impact of the pipeline was no longer possible for UNDP, as the Chinese companies did not really care about the findings of the study. In some ways it was an enlightening experience, although the end was sobering: public private partnerships were clearly able to solve problems which so far appeared intractable. The UN could serve as a facilitator and intermediary. But if only one of the partners was not

willing to play ball, then all professional capacity in the world would not make such an effort successful. It was my most direct brush with China's naked capitalist spirit, and it was not in the commercial community, it was in the state planning authority!³⁰

Projects like this one, where strong macro-economic state interests prevailed without any consideration to the social and environmental implications, raised again the issue which effective checks and balances China was going to use in order to get to a more balanced economic growth path. There were economists at the Chinese Academy for Social Sciences (CASS) and at important universities who advocated for a "qualitative growth strategy"; they were developing criteria and indicators for the qualitative aspects of economic growth. We supported such efforts wholeheartedly, but the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the IMF were only giving lukewarm support. As they were the heavyweights in the arena of macro-economic advisors among multilateral organizations, there was no real breakthrough for such alternative economic thinking in China at the time.

Another avenue I pursued was to work more closely with the CPPCC³¹, the quasi upper house of the Chinese parliamentary system. Retired senior officials or scientists were members and many were affiliated with other parties than the Communist Party of China.³² The central government at the highest level was seeking the advice of this body, in particular when it was preparing its annual review of the government's performance or introducing new legislation. Members of this body were particularly interested in defining a value system for the current Chinese economic and political situation which would allow at least a modicum of justice, equal opportunity and fairness. All these discus-

³⁰ A year later I understood why the State Planning Commission had been so hardnosed: China was heading towards major energy supply constraints and wanted to get the pipeline off the ground without any further delay. Worrying about poor local communities along the way of this pipeline was not in the script of their investment plans. Gas needed to get pumped to the Eastern provinces in order to meet the ever increasing energy demands. Considerations about poverty alleviation out West were left to a later point in time. The rationing of electricity in Beijing and Shanghai during the summer of 2004 and 2005 was a strong wakeup call to consumers in the Eastern provinces that rapid economic development had its constraints. Pushing blindly big infrastructure projects and neglecting the situation of the poor in the Western provinces could only add to the arising problems.

³¹ Chinese People's Parties Consultative Congress

³² There are 8 political parties in China, including the KMT (Kuomintang), with representatives in both the parliamentary system as well as the government.

sions, although intellectually stimulating, showed the gulf between those engaged in their quest to make China an economic force to be reckoned with internationally and those concerned about giving each and every Chinese a chance to participate in the development process. Somehow the fear that a value-based social and economic system might lead to a slowdown in economic growth was overpowering. I came away from these discussions that without a further change in the Communist Party of China, there was no way that a better balance between economic growth, social justice and ecological preservation would be struck.

The need for democratization

At this point of the analysis, observers from outside China enter the lack of a democratic system into the equation. Democracy in this context is defined as a multi-party, parliamentary system with universal elections of deputies coming from different parties and competing for the votes of the general public. Some will also add the need for the strict separation of the three state powers of the legislative, the executive and the judicial power. While such a blueprint is partly helpful to better understand what is happening in China with regard to the evolution of the political system, it is alien to the Chinese tradition and it is insensitive to the multitude of efforts which Chinese authorities and individuals are undertaking to get to a more democratic and transparent regime which is governed by the *rule of law* and not the *rule of man*.³³

Since 1911 China has had various experiences with electoral systems. While the establishment of a republic with an elected leadership quickly deteriorated into a situation in the 1920s and 1930s where warlords were fighting among each other, the eventual victory of the Communist Party brought social stability and a new leadership committed to overcoming social inequities of the past. According to the Leninist concept of democratic centralism party leaders were in a downwardly cascading system co-opted by the next higher level of

³³ In 2008, the debate about a reform of the political system intensified in China. A group of professors from the central party school in Beijing, whose Chancellor is the Central Party Secretary, Hu Jintao, published a report proposing among others the separation of the legislature, executive and the judicature. They would not have been able to publish this report with the blessing from the highest level of the CPC.

communist leadership after 1949. The general public had no say in who was to govern them, nor did the vast majority of Chinese really care. There had been several movements, often initiated by students, which had debated the need for greater political freedom, especially greater freedom of expression of views. But none of these movements was allowed to mature into a public debate about the evolution of the political system. After 1978 a tacit compact was struck between the political leadership and the general public which runs approximately like this:

As long as the leadership secures the improvement of living conditions for all (or at least the prospect of such) and the freedom for the people to pursue their own interests, the basic structure of the political system will not be questioned in the name of patriotic loyalty, social stability and national pride.

Part of the national leadership realizes that this compact is built on shifting ground. Increasingly, there are people who are left behind and left out of the ever rising living standards. Poverty in the rural areas is drastically reduced, but new forms of poverty (through urban unemployment and the exploitation of migrant workers) are occurring. But this new poverty is not as yet all pervasive and solutions are being sought to address the newly arising needs of those who fall on hard times. Within the political system, there is an openness to analyze the inequities, to demand that the disadvantaged are being helped, to debate what the best possible solutions are, which would do any democratic system proud. I have witnessed or participated in many such discussions. In fact, China's economic and technological success since 1978 would not have been possible if such openness had not existed. Therefore, any demand for more democracy in China has to take as its starting point these features of the system, as they will be the roots for any potential change.

China, which geographically spans the distance similar to that from Moscow to Sicily and from Ireland to the Caucasus, has to all intents and purposes the size of a continent. Over almost two millennia, the written language and the tradition of a unified Confucian state held China together under an emperor who was governing through a civil service which had four main functions: to manage the water resources, to collect taxes, to serve as judges and to protect and, at times,

to expand the borders of the empire. Today it is first and foremost the Communist Party which is holding the country together. Party officials rank at all levels higher than officials of the state which is run by civil servants who may or may not be members of the Communist Party. For those who are members of the Communist Party, a system of periodic transfers and moves between party and state functions is building a successful career to the very top. Those who remain in a given ministerial or provincial setting are required to constantly improve their professional qualifications through various training programs. Promotions are normally preceded by the participation in a training program at either the provincial or central party school. In particular, the central party school has some of the very best social scientists of China, who, given their proximity to the party leadership, can be very courageous in raising critical issues of China's current development process.³⁴

The army serves as a guarantor for national security and territorial integrity, staying mostly in the background. In the day-to-day political affairs of China they are fairly invisible to the common eye. One runs into visible army installations only in the border areas and there more as units which dominate the local economy than as a military force.

In any institutional and geographic setting, the Party Secretary is always the highest ranking official. Occasionally, a governmental or military post and the post of the Party Secretary may be held by the same person. But that is the exception rather than the rule. A successful career would alternate between a party post and a government/military post with increasing levels of responsibilities.

Except for the years of Mao's rule (1949–1976), the state left many aspects of economic and social life to be determined by families, local officials and organizations such as the guilds and associations of artisans and merchants. It is in this part of China's political history and tradition that the sources of a potentially more democratic system lie. Regrettably, these traditions are still buried under the legacy of the Maoist rule.

³⁴ The latest study by scholars from the central party school was published in February 2008 and proposed several radical reforms to the political system, such as the direct elections of the deputies to the People's Congress and the separation of the executive, legislative and judicial powers. The book of some 300 pages was sold out within a few days.

But modern versions of these local initiatives are bubbling up and hence the search for a democratic future from political systems external to China are rejected by those who today govern the country, although by the time I am writing these memoirs there are signs that this might be changing.³⁵ The current CPC leaders see the need for political reforms, but want the process to be a gradual evolution built on local experiments and initiatives similar to the economic reform process.

In the decades since Mao's death, Sichuan has been the hotbed of political reform and experimentation. Free, universal and secret ballot elections were first introduced in some villages in this province in the late 1970s, allowing for an election from among several candidates for the post of the village leader and committee. Ten years later, village elections could be carried out on a trial basis anywhere in the country. Then, in 1998, the People's Congress passed legislation making such elections mandatory. Some 3.2 million village leaders are thus elected in the whole country through a general popular vote every four years.³⁶

The national party leadership was initially divided over how to react to these experiments. But eventually it was decided that local elections should be introduced throughout China, and the Ministry of Community Services was mandated to ensure that elections were held in the rural areas throughout the country in an orderly executed way. My predecessors had jumped on the opportunity to assist in this process. Similarly, the foundations of both the Republican as well as the Democratic Party of the United States were active in supporting local electoral systems throughout the 1990s.³⁷

The process of introducing local elections was painfully slow, and fraught with frustrations. UNDP had been asked by the supervising ministry to assist in developing the system and in training local officials to organize these elections according to the rules, which foresaw

³⁵ See previous footnote

³⁶ For more details see Baogang He, *How democratic are Village Elections in China?* Presentation to the Forum of the National Endowment for Democracy, June 2003

³⁷ In the mid-1990s, bodies of the local party had moved on and introduced that for each party post there should be at least three candidates, whose acceptance should be tested by a universal poll before the party officials appointed the candidate winning such an acceptance vote. In many locations the party was no longer vetting candidates for the village committees, anyone could become a candidate.

universal and secret balloting. While understandably the ministry was strictly adhering to its supervisory role of the whole process, in the view of others it caved in too quickly to any form of opposition from local powers at the county, prefectural and/or provincial level. I repeatedly went to the ministry and urged them to quicken the pace and to overrule local objections, especially in places where no elections had been held,³⁸ but to no avail. I was also recommending to the ministry to move the whole process, which was limited to rural communities, on to urban districts, as people were migrating and it was difficult for them to comprehend why they were allowed to vote in rural but not in urban areas. Eventually, some urban districts in Beijing began to experiment with elections of officials through a secret ballot system, and the government and the party at least did not stop it. By 2002, all our project funds had been exhausted, and the EU had approved support for several million Euros over five years. The local EU office approached me, whether UNDP was willing to serve as supervisors of the sub-contractors which they were engaging for the execution of their project. While this resulted in a highly complicated managerial set up, and did not give UNDP the necessary funds to compensate us for our professional services, I nevertheless agreed, as the Chinese side wanted UNDP to stay involved.

Good governance – a running concern of the UNDP program

Two other efforts in our portfolio of governance projects are worth mentioning: for years, UNDP had funded technical assistance which the IMF was providing to the Ministry of Finance and the Tax Administration. Under my predecessors, UNDP had pretty much left it to the IMF and the Chinese fiscal authorities to set the priorities for such cooperation. Over the years, our projects had thus migrated down the bureaucratic ladder and were assisting the departments of the ministry and of the tax administration in highly specialized tasks. Meanwhile the Chinese government was seeking its policy advice from others, e.g. commercial banks in Hong Kong and the US. While the Chinese top leaders could obviously request assistance from anyone they choose

³⁸ In the late 1990s, some villages were holding already their third or even fourth election, while in others they were still waiting for the first round.

I was interested in having scarce UNDP resources provide advice on fiscal policies rather than on technicalities. I thus challenged our partners in the IMF, and withheld approval for another phase until we had reached agreement on new priorities.

Two aspects were of particular relevance to us: 1. the abolition of levies and fees in particular in rural areas, as we knew that they could add up to more than the regular tax burden for farmers, and 2. a reform of the decentralized structure of the tax administration. In our view a centralized system could better manage the transfer of public revenue from richer provinces to poorer ones.

Initially, the IMF staff did not want to touch these issues. They argued that these were issues that the Chinese authorities had to handle by themselves. While I agreed that the decisions on these policy issues lay solely with the Chinese authorities, I disagreed that we as impartial external partners could not provide advice and counsel on these matters. Personally I considered these more important than endless seminars and meetings on the merits and demerits of introducing a VAT system. In the end we reached a compromise and used some of our funds for the monitoring and reporting on some pilot exercises in rural areas where levies and fees were suspended. The beneficial effect on the economic growth in those counties was phenomenal and took everybody by surprise. A smaller number of VAT related activities were retained, and the recentralization of the tax administration through a highly integrated computerized system was set in motion.

Another of our long standing cooperative efforts was with the customs administration. In the late 1990s and the years after 2000, about 40 percent of all public revenue came from the collection of customs duties. The customs administration was a centralized service and this revenue thus accrued to the central government. I was very interested in continuing this cooperation, as efficiencies realized in the customs administration had an immediate and direct effect on the availability of public funds to the central government, e.g. for the central government's anti-poverty program.

Of course, UNDP was not the only partner in this field, but we were a long-standing and trusted one. The World Bank and bilateral donors envied us for such access to the Chinese system. But at the same time,

we were aware that even our best efforts were not enough to pull China through to a transparent and well functioning fiscal system. Too strong were the forces at the local level which resisted any attempt to change the practice of setting their own priorities and fudging figures of revenues and expenditures. Besides, the Chinese system encouraged budgetary practices which were counter-productive, such as asking for matching funds (on a 1:1 basis) from provincial and local governments to those made available by the central government. Poorer provinces and counties were clearly at a disadvantage and became very creative in raising local revenue through land deals, local taxes and the like in order to match and access central government funds. In some instances they succeeded quite well and were tapping several central government sources and got twice as much as they had made available. But these were exceptions. More often local authorities used these combined funds for projects which had little effect on the improvement of the local population's situation. Before building schools and clinics they build hotels and fancy guesthouses. Before improving road conditions they invested in the electrification of the better off parts of the county and small towns. Sometimes, work was shoddy. I recall a bridge in a Sichuan small town which collapsed three times because of faulty construction. In some other instances land had been condemned to make room for a public building, and the legally guaranteed compensations were not paid. In those cases local residents rebelled, at times violently.

The party at the central level was well aware of these problems and was searching for an appropriate response to such political practices. In 2001, a study by scholars of the central party school was published, which gave for the first time an indication of the degree of social unrest throughout China³⁹, and the authors were asking what the response should be to these local uprisings. The political analysts fully understood that a police response was inadequate. Interestingly enough, foreigners interested in China's political system pretty much ignored this study, and the open invitation of the party to discuss ways and means

³⁹ The study showed that throughout the year there were some 400 protests daily by the local populations, some of which turned violent, and would then hit even the national news.

to find a solution, which would channel such protests into more peaceful mechanisms, was mostly ignored. Just before I left in mid-2003, we had many discussions in the UN country team on how we as the UN system might respond to the raised issues. As part of our portfolio of projects dealing with legal system reforms, I was interested in strengthening the arbitration and mediation mechanisms throughout China for such conflicts.

China will find its own way to a democratic system and a more transparent government. Clearly the Communist Party today is very different from the party under Mao Zedong. The question only is: will political reforms be quick enough to determine through democratic elections who governs China after the current cohort of leaders? The transition from the Jiang Zemin/Zhu Rongji cohort to the Hu Jintao/Wen Jiabao cohort was not based on the outcome of universal elections, but it was based on a wide and open consensus building process throughout the party, and even the country. As a result it was timely, it was peaceful and it brought fresh air into the offices at the highest level. Today Premier Wen Jiabao is speaking more like a leader of the opposition to well entrenched party leaders than as the head of a central government dictating what the rest of the country should or should not do. He is constantly advising government officials at all levels to avoid corruption and to listen to people, and Hu Jintao as the Party Secretary of the central party organs is doing the same with regard to the cadres of the party. In spite of lacking public controls, political leaders are well advised to heed the voices of the population, if they want to remain in office.

A carefully choreographed power play between the party, the government and the army is daily enacted. For now, Chinese leaders consider this separation of the three centers of political power as sufficient to guarantee democracy in China. The party has the responsibility to respond to expressed or perceived public needs, and to translate these into policies, plans and laws. The government is to carry out such policies and plans according to the laws. The army is there to protect China from any foreign invasion of Chinese territory and any undesirable threats to social stability. In this latter regard the army always looms as a threat to the political leadership that they will intervene if and when the political leaders lose control of a po-

litical development as they did in the summer of 1989. At the time Deng Xiaoping saved the day for the civilian political leaders and for himself by requesting in his capacity as Chairman of the Armed Forces Committee the army to intervene. Of the three posts Chairman of the Communist Party, Head of State and Chairman of the Armed Forces Committee the latter is considered the most powerful.⁴⁰ Yet, it is the Communist Party of China which is holding the country together, as they still have a strong hierarchical system in place, reaching from the center in Beijing to the last village in the remotest areas. Many times, central party instructions reach the local level cadres in a distorted version, or they are interpreted to suit local circumstances and lose their intended meaning. For instance, government authorities at the provincial level and below pursue the realization of high economic growth rates mostly at great costs to the natural environment and social equity. Relevant national legislation is neglected. Although the central government is developing both fiscal and other instruments to stem these negative effects, China is vast, Beijing is far and the sky is high.

China's leaders have two big traumatic historic events which determine many of their actions. One is the Cultural Revolution and the other is the summer of 1989. While the Cultural Revolution has been described and analyzed to a degree that allows to openly speak about its events, including its atrocities, the Tiananmen Square events are still taboo. In 1999, I attempted to have an analysis of the events and their significance for China's political development done by the Chinese human rights community. I invited a few of their leaders to my house together with one of my predecessors, Roy Morey, who served in China in 1989, to discuss how such an analysis could be done. My Chinese guests listened politely to all our arguments why such an exercise was needed and how beneficial it might prove to China's political evolution. They even agreed to a large extent with us, but in the end they said it was "too early". Obviously, no signals were received

⁴⁰ Since Jiang Zemin, the chairman of the party is also Head of State and Chairman of the Armed Forces Committee. When Jiang Zemin retired he led go of the third function last, and everybody was watching intently whether and if so, when he would transfer this function to Hu Jintao. In the best of the mandarin tradition, Hu Jintao had to prove to the older political leaders that he was capable of running the state, the party and the army.

from up high that it was okay to publicly discuss and critically analyze the events of 1989.⁴¹

Overall, developments over the latter years of the reform period show that China is more democratic than it appears when looking through Western lenses. Yet, even with the greatest empathy for the Chinese way of doing things, one can but worry about the slow pace with which changes to the political system are introduced, in order to create strong checks and balances on the political and economic decision-makers. Corruption is rampant, and the most important political irritants of the Chinese people. The death penalty is not a successful deterrent as recurring scandals at the highest level of government show. More transparency of the decision-making process and greater popular participation in the decision-finding process is now urgently needed in order to chart a political development course which is benefitting the majority of people in China, and increasingly the rest of the world, too.⁴²

Because of the persistent bureaucratic and authoritarian style in many parts of the system, as for instance in the case of the Chinese handling of the situation in Tibet, where 16 different party, government and army units are in charge of keeping the situation under control, external development partners are still useful in China. In many instances, the Chinese can and will pay for this assistance. Those forces which are in charge of promoting political reforms in China are in need of

⁴¹ There is a big blind spot in the Chinese current political culture. When something is considered taboo then it is done without any differentiation, which is frustrating. For instance, even in 2003, almost 25 years after the Tiananmen Square events, the parents of the students who had been killed were still not allowed to mourn them on 4th April, Qing Ming, when the whole of China remembers their dead. Because demonstrations for Hu Yaobang on Qing Ming 1976, had brought down the Maoist regime, the current leadership does not want to run a similar risk. It is here where the Chinese leaders, who work and live in close proximity of each other, show their greatest weakness. Admittedly, the Chinese have a tendency to hold back their grievances and go on with their lives until such a time that their anger explodes and such explosions become a runaway affair. However, only by letting people express their views and complaints regularly and freely will the Chinese society “learn” to avoid such violent eruptions.

⁴² It is by now almost common place among foreign observers to argue that China’s rapid economic growth and its ever increasing hunger for natural resources, which it cannot find on its own territory, is threatening the ecological balance of our planet. In 2002, we tried to show that China had options to its current development paradigm in our annual National Human Development Report “Making Green Development a Choice”, building in part on its rich tradition of recycling used resources. But of all the reports which we published this was the one which received the least of an echo.

such partnerships. Entrenched interests in the party hierarchy and the ever growing influence of the emerging class of Chinese entrepreneurs will otherwise dominate the political decisions. Development partners cannot and should not be shy in throwing in their lot to help change public policy in a direction which the country would otherwise have trouble to find and would certainly take much longer to realize. Let me report on two such experiences.

HIV/AIDS and SARS crises – the failing of China’s public health system

The first case of AIDS infection was recorded in China in 1985. A Chinese who returned from a Southeast Asian country tested positive for the virus. Since then, people infected with the virus are found all over China, especially along the routes drugs are transiting through China on their way from Central Asia to Japan and beyond. Besides, in rural areas infected needles had been used repeatedly during blood donation drives. In urban areas, sexual promiscuity also spread the virus. While the numbers were still low, and at best they were guestimates, the recorded rates of further infections of up to 20 percent were worrisome and bode ill for those populations at highest risk. Affluent urban youth, truckers, unemployed in small towns and young people from poor rural settings, in particular women offering sex commercially, were groups which were the mostly exposed. The public health system was recording these developments with growing concern, but did not know how to make it public knowledge and start prevention measures.

Kofi Annan had made the fight against AIDS one of the top priorities of the UN system. We as resident coordinators were obliged to monitor the situation in our country of assignment, set up AIDS theme groups with participation of all organizations engaged in the fight against AIDS, and to advise the government how best to respond to this ever growing epidemic. As good international civil servants we had responded to all of these demands from New York. Our UNAIDS⁴³ advisor, Dr. Emile Fox, was proactive and kept us, the UN

⁴³ In 1996, several UN organizations had formed a consortium with a small secretariat in Geneva which was to coordinate action internationally and through the posting of advisors to the resident coordinator system at the country level.

country team and the Ministry of Health, on our toes. However, increasingly he became frustrated, as all the knowledge which he shared was not leading to any concerted action outside the UN system, and even within the UN it was slow in coming.

Eventually, he proposed and the UN country team accepted that a comprehensive report should be written and published in the name of the AIDS theme group. Members of the theme group collected information during 2001 and the first half of 2002. In June 2002, an update of the AIDS situation was ready for publication. The title was the most dramatic we could think of. We named the report: *HIV/AIDS: China's Titanic Peril*. We decided to launch the report in a similar way as we had done with other important UN reports. We organized a press conference inviting both foreign correspondents as well as the Chinese press. The turnout was enormous. Some 200 journalists attended, but only foreign participants raised questions, except for one representative of the Ministry of Health, who was questioning the appropriateness of the title. Our launch coincided with the international AIDS conference in Barcelona, attended by the Minister of Health and other high ranking officials of the ministry. Thus the minister learned about our report in Barcelona and it hit him unprepared, because contrary to what the immediate collaborators of Emile Fox in the Ministry of Health had told us, they had not informed the minister beforehand about the imminent release of our assessment. We knew that the Chinese government at the highest level was in denial of this impending epidemic, but we did not know that they basically did not know the facts.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ I had gotten an inkling of this "ignorance" when in his visit to China in 2001: the Secretary-General took on my advice the AIDS challenge up in his meeting with President Jiang Zemin, who at the time understood this to be a challenge relating to Africa. I had counted that the mere fact that Kofi Annan raised the issue would suffice to spark a request from the President's office to the Ministry of Health, what this AIDS issue was all about. As the minister was also the personal physician of the president, I was hoping that at least he would be asked informally. But apparently this did not happen. Only one year later, in October 2002, and a few months after the publication of the *Titanic report* did President Jiang Zemin raise the issue in his next meeting with Kofi Annan, and expressed the concern of the Chinese authorities. While the interpreter was translating the President's statement Jiang Zemin was looking hard at me, and I could detect curiosity in his eyes. He seemed to convey his query: who is this foreign woman forcing me to speak to something I don't understand anything about?

Following this press conference we lived through some anxious moments. The foreign press was pushing us hard to give them quotes which would show the situation to be more dramatic than what we said in our report. They also wanted us to criticize the government openly for its perceived inaction. Although we ducked these provocations, the publication of the report and its findings rippled through the foreign media, while the Chinese press largely remained silent.

Word came from our colleagues in Geneva and Barcelona nervously asking what we were up to by provoking the Chinese authorities so much. New York on the other hand was appreciative of our report and apparently asked the UN country team in India when they would publish their report.

In the end, however, the minister upon his return from Barcelona invited me together with several members of the country team to a dinner and discussed with us our views and recommendations. Regrettably, as so often in life, when Chinese leaders are unsure of what to do, they play the numbers game. The minister in a gesture of good will assured us that the ministry would improve its data collected to monitor the spread of infections and people living with AIDS. He continued to ignore that for us it was not the numbers which were the issue, but the stigmatization, discrimination and the totally inadequate response to the threat of ever more people in China catching the virus due to the prevailing silence about this public health challenge.

If we thought that we had weathered a bad storm over AIDS in the summer of 2002, little did we know that only six months later another, and much worse, storm was about to hit us: SARS!

Around November/December 2002 we read in the international press that a strange pulmonary infection had spread in the coastal areas of Guangdong province, but that the medical services had brought it under control and that the spread had been stopped. But rumors continued to circulate that the infection had been carried into neighboring provinces, in particular to Hong Kong. I travelled in mid-January to Hong Kong to give a lecture at one of the universities and found no signs of a public health threat. However, when I returned to Beijing, I had a call from UNDP Headquarters in New York asking for an update. The news about Hong Kong obviously was flowing much more

freely internationally than in China. The news about the situation in Guangdong province suggested that the health threat was over. But that was an illusion. A week after my return, the Hong Kong authorities imposed restrictions on the movement of their population. Within hours the busy Hong Kong airport was deserted and pictures of an empty airport were seen on TV.

I agreed with New York to closely monitor the situation and to report regularly about further developments. I also called my colleague the WHO representative, Henk Bekedam, and asked him for an update. What he had to say was quite troubling. WHO had finally succeeded in getting access to Guangdong, and had learned that the infection was caused by an unknown virus which had been transmitted to humans via the food chain. The first case had been a cook in a Chinese restaurant who had slaughtered wild cats for human consumption. He had survived the viral infection, but others had not. By early February, the virus had spread to other countries in Asia and beyond and to Northern China. In Beijing we still had no official reaction from the Ministry of Health or other authorities. Henk therefore decided to organize regular briefings for the diplomatic corps and for the press, as he was no longer able to handle the number of individual enquiries. Ministry officials and officials of the Beijing municipality were furious about such open communications. But senior leaders (as we learned later) continued to receive SMS telling about the seriousness of the evolving situation and decided to let WHO continue with its briefings. Clearly we had learned our lesson from the handling of the HIV/AIDS epidemic—while parts of the Chinese system had not. We were slipping into a very uncomfortable and undesirable situation: silence on the part of the Chinese authorities, and alarming news from WHO.

When in mid-March WHO in Geneva issued its first travel advisory recommending that travel to and from certain destinations, including Beijing, should be curtailed, I convened a Disaster Management Team⁴⁵ meeting in order to discuss and agree among all UN organizations and with other donor and relief organizations (e.g. the Red Cross) what could and should be done to help the Chinese govern-

⁴⁵ This was a standing team of members from all UN organizations which was convened as and when an emergency in the country needed special attention and support.

ment in this emerging public health crisis. Agreement was quickly reached that protective clothes for medical personnel was most urgently needed and that the Chinese authorities needed to communicate more openly about what they were doing, which indeed by then was a lot. We assumed that as soon as the national session of the People's Congress was over⁴⁶, the public health authorities and the Beijing Municipality were more willing to listen and cooperate.

By then (second half of March 2003), the situation had become dramatic. Hospitals and clinics in Beijing were full with people showing the symptoms of what had become known as SARS. From Tianjin, Hebei province and Inner Mongolia additional cases were reported and people flocked into Beijing for treatment. At the same time, devices were installed at the airports and train stations, which monitored the body temperature of travelers. People showing raised temperatures were not allowed to board departing flights.

March/April is normally flu season in Beijing, so doctors were used to receiving more patients with flu symptoms which in the early stages of a SARS infection were pretty much the same. Therefore, nobody knew how to separate the two groups. In fact, the probability that people would catch the virus in the hospital or a clinic while waiting to be attended to was fairly high. It was a prisoner's dilemma for the medical personnel.

The Minister of Health was dismissed and Mme Wu Yi, the State Councillor supervising public health, was made to act as the minister. The Mayor of Beijing was sacked and the Governor of Hainan was called to Beijing to run the city in an acting capacity. The newly installed national government under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao realized that this was a first test for them, and that they had to prove that they could manage such a crisis.

I had come under enormous pressure from my agency colleagues to evacuate the UN community, as some smaller embassies had done. But as none of the big embassies nor the EU or the World Bank mission had done so I was reluctant to take such a step. Instead, I sent

⁴⁶ As this was the session where Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji were stepping down and a new team of national leaders was to be elected, the political leaders did not want their agenda to be overshadowed by a public health crisis.

daily e-mail messages to all UN staff recommending that they do what they felt was best to protect themselves and their families. I therefore did not restrict travel in the early days, but urged staff and their relatives to limit travel in the city and outside to places where they might meet big crowds. When the international schools closed, the situation changed and colleagues with families were again asking whether it was not time to evacuate.

I consulted the UN medical doctor in New York about the best course of action, and we agreed that given that the children were now out of school, we should allow families to go on medical evacuation for a six week period initially, if they wanted to leave. While New York agreed, Geneva did not, and further discussions and consultations had to be held. But eventually all UN organizations supported our measure and authorized the evacuation.

Then in early April, the UN community got hit directly. A visiting ILO expert came down with the symptoms and was not saved. His death sent waves of fear through the UN community and the diplomatic corps. Our colleagues from ILO went into self-imposed quarantine at a hotel, as several staff in their office had been in direct contact with the expert before he was properly diagnosed.

But we did not close the offices. We left it to our staff, especially the national staff, whether they felt comfortable to report to work and do their work. In fact, they were grateful to escape to a “sanctuary” where life continued in as normal a fashion as was possible. By early April, the panic in the city could be felt everywhere, but the government was still not giving out the information on the number of cases they had. Only WHO with the help of UNICEF was publishing such data daily. The Ministry of Health and the Municipal Government of Beijing could not reach an agreement on who among them would be responsible for the release of such information. Eventually, WHO succeeded in getting them to agree and the Mayor’s coordination office would hold daily press briefings with ministry staff in attendance. But the way in which the officials shared the information and responded to the queries of the journalists was unprofessional and the suspicion of the journalists that information was being withheld could be felt. Although Henk Bekedam went to these briefings and backed the government up wherever he could, he did continue with his own

sessions as the demand was too strong for WHO not to drop their independent briefings.

I discussed with Henk Bekedam and we agreed that something needed to be done to improve the communication skills of the government officials. The question was: what?

While the SARS crisis was building up, I was working in a personal capacity with the Rotary Club in Beijing to organize a charity event to sponsor local efforts to help people living with AIDS. In this context I met Serge Dumont, a French public relations' specialist, who had masterly communication skills. I discussed with him and asked him whether he would be willing to help the Beijing authorities under UN auspices to improve their communications' skills. He said "yes" although I warned him that UNDP would only be able to pay a fraction of what he was normally paid by his clients.

Having found an expert, I now needed to convince the Beijing authorities that they needed "help", and I had to find money to pay for Serge's technical services. Normally, UNDP approves a small allocation of up to \$ 30,000 to any country office to jumpstart international support in an emergency situation. But nobody at UNDP Headquarters or in the donor community had ever heard of using emergency funds for improving the public communication skills of the local government. They were used to provide medicines, temporary shelter, and consultants to strengthen the medical capacity. However, these were either already provided or the government was using their own personnel and funds to procure these items.

The sequence of steps to get approval for the needed assistance was now very important. First I went with Henk Bekedam to see the new Mayor of Beijing and offered our assistance. He was somewhat bemused and even amused by my urging that Beijing had to improve its way of communicating with the press and diplomatic missions, but as I also offered to find the "right" person who spoke fluent Chinese and lived in Beijing and that UNDP would pay for his services, he accepted our offer.

I then had to get the funds from New York, while at the same time recruiting Serge. WHO was very nervous about UNDP getting involved in what they considered their field of expertise. In order to avoid

any potential tension, I offered to recruit Serge as an advisor to WHO, which would make his services available to the Beijing authorities. As I was still negotiating these arrangements I asked my administration to start the recruitment process, and I was calling New York daily to obtain the approval and transfer of these requested funds. Neither my staff nor New York fully understood what I was up to. It developed to a stage, where I told my staff “just do the necessary” and my colleagues in New York, “trust me; this is what is most useful as a UNDP contribution”. Fortunately, my reputation was strong enough to eventually get all the necessary approvals, so that Serge who had started his work would be paid, and the Beijing Municipal Government felt comfortable enough to open upon Serge’s advice a special office to better inform the media on the course that SARS took in Beijing.

As so often in China the results of our small intervention were phenomenal. Despite initial reluctance and strong skepticism on the part of the decision-makers, they gave Serge and UNDP the benefit of the doubt, and in the end were fully converted to the new world of the media society, where skillful communications make or break the image of a politician or a government action.

Altogether, the Beijing municipality held nine press conferences. The first one was rocky, the journalists hostile and the officials unsure what information to share and which to treat as confidential. The 9th conference, which I attended, was friendly, jokes were traded and the journalists asked questions showing their understanding for the incredible pressure on the officials and recognized the successful efforts made to get the epidemic under control. Beijing wanted our support to continue and cover the preparations for the 2008 Olympic Games, but we decided that commercial partners could be engaged by the municipality to deal with these challenges.

The weeks of the SARS epidemic in Beijing from end March to the beginning of June 2003, were bittersweet. On the one hand we heard about truly tragic cases where several members of the same family died, on the other hand life took on a calmer pace and Beijing became for most of us, who were not affected by the disease, a lovely place. During a sunny springtime, we enjoyed all the splendors of the city’s parks and surrounding mountainous areas.

Tourism had come to a complete halt, most hotels were empty, motorized traffic was reduced to a trickle and one could drive around Beijing as in the old days. Beijingers took out their bicycles, the badminton rackets and whole families walked in the parks instead of going shopping in the big malls.

Villages around Beijing closed themselves off to the city folks and let no stranger even pass through. Voluntary guards were posted to stop anyone who was not a member of the village. Near the Ming Tombs where I knew my way around as I often walked with friends among the ruined tombs, we had once entered the village from the fields and were now leaving it to get back to our car. I will never forget the bewildered look on the guard's face when we came from inside the village rather than from outside. What on earth had we *waiguoren* (foreigners) done on the wrong side of his barrier? We tried to explain it to him, but I am not sure he understood us or believed us, but at least he let us go.

The epidemic left as it had come. People decided when it was over. Life resumed and the roads filled with newly acquired cars. Traffic jams were worse than before. The city government had decided that people could get a temporary license when they bought a new car and could start driving it immediately. Many used this opportunity, first, to avoid travelling in cramped buses and by taxi and subway, in order to limit their exposure to a possible infection, and second, to take advantage of this unusual, unbureaucratic procedure. The streets and roads filled with inexperienced and overtly cautious drivers, who held up traffic flows. Slowly commercial traffic resumed, too, and vehicular traffic began rapidly to outnumber the bicyclists again. In late May, I took Henk Bekedam on a spin around town to make him see for himself, that Beijingers had decided that the epidemic was over. As the supervisor of WHO staff members who were fully involved in the medical response he had not found time to notice the changes in the daily rhythm of the city. Still, the hospitals remained full with SARS patients and although the number of new infections had steadily declined, there still were new cases, and so the medical services resisted the pressure to declare the end of the epidemic. Only in late June, the public health authorities announced with WHO's full support that the SARS threat had ended, but that vigilance was still necessary. Full life sprang back with a vengeance. Everybody was eager to recoup the lost time through redoubled efforts.

Saying “good-bye”

At this point in time my China assignment was coming to a close. In early April, I had flown for an interview in Geneva on my way back from New York. The newly elected Director-General of WHO was assembling a new team of Assistant Directors-General to lead a restructured WHO Headquarters and I was considered for the position of the one in charge of Health and Sustainable Development. Although I was sorry to leave UNDP after 28 years, I wanted to return to Europe and prepare myself for a life after the UN. The interview went well and I was getting ready to leave in July after an eventful assignment of five years and four months in a country whose people I had come to love and respect.

The day I left, the staff of the office had assembled all the VIP airport passes which the UN organizations had, and a huge number of colleagues accompanied me to the airport all the way to the gate. At the security check the guards were confused by this UN invasion and asked who was actually travelling. I could barely keep my composure and when I finally settled into my seat I cried uncontrollably. The stewardess came and asked whether she could help, but I just wanted to be left alone. Eventually, somewhere over Siberia I got my emotions under control and behaved again like a normal passenger. But inside I was sad and for the first time not looking forward, but absorbed by the pain of leaving China.

These years in China had been the most challenging and rewarding of all my assignments. In many ways, China is “a dream come true” for any development professional. China can serve as a model for successful development cooperation, as all necessary features are in place: A strong national government takes all decisions after an elaborate national consultation process. This makes life easy for an external development agency. At the working level there are national partners, who are willing to listen and absorb outside advice and expertise. This is invigorating. National counterparts take advice from various sources and form their own opinion and views; increasingly they are willing to debate their options, which is reassuring. This behavior is part of a learning society, which in all corners of the country is ready to pursue change and reform agendas. The political culture allows officials to politely and courteously acknowledge the contributions of external

partners, which gives the impression to be welcomed and appreciated. At the same time the officials leave no doubt that the Chinese are the owners of their decisions. China today is an environment, where taboos are few, and discussion and suggestions are invited as long as such external advice observes rules of respect for Chinese sovereignty and the Chinese protocol. One such rule is that one can openly and quite critically speak of a Chinese situation as long as it is said to the “right” person or institution. Speaking to the press, especially the foreign media is in most cases not considered to be “right” by the Chinese authorities. This meant that we always had to weigh what we wanted to get across to the Chinese side, when, to whom and how. Speaking to the media was in many instances not the most effective way. At the same time we could not refuse to be interviewed by journalists.⁴⁷

In the fast moving environment of China, knowing first whatever was important was a constant pressure. Getting the insight scoop on an issue was even more sought after. After a while, the journalists realized that we in the UN and especially in UNDP had access to critical domestic information which we were, however, not at liberty to share, given the government’s reluctance to give the press more freedom for reporting. Thus, the handling of press interviews was a particularly challenging task. I wanted to give the press more information on critical issues as we saw them, but I also did not want to lose my access to the Chinese decision-makers. Generally speaking, we knew that if a critical news item first appeared in the foreign media, this could well block us from discussing it with Chinese policy-makers. Therefore, we had first to raise it with the Chinese officials before answering queries

47 I became quite comfortable with handling the press, although I remained wary of such interviews, and I had my share of misadventures. Apart from the incidence with the Wall Street Journal over the Falun Gong issue, I once gave an Australian journalist the opening to report that I was uncritically supporting the Chinese political system. The occasion was the launch of the global Human Development Report in 2002 on good governance: the government did not wish to be associated with (as they usually did by sending a high-ranking official), neither did they permit that we launched the report in a hotel (as was the practice). We therefore invited a Chinese scholar to present and comment on the report and we presented it to a huge press gathering in our conference room. During the Q & A the journalist wanted to know from the scholar when he expected that the Chinese would be able to elect their president. The scholar was uneasy responding and I therefore moved the discussion forward by saying somewhat angrily that this was not the topic of this session. Instead, I should have asked him when he expected that the Australians could elect their Head of State to replace the Queen in London. But the best answers always come to mind afterwards.

from the press. In the case of the HIV/AIDS issue we thought we had followed this sequence, but insufficiently as we learned after the fact, which almost derailed our efforts to put the fight against HIV/AIDS on the national agenda as I showed earlier on.

Looking back

China is exemplary in terms of the development process which is dynamic and in terms of such dynamics self-sustaining. Something one cannot say for most developing countries. But it also has all the pluses and minuses of such a rapid and even accelerating process. China, which has an age-old philosophical paradigm of the “golden middle” and “keeping the balance”, has lost just that. It also has lost its practices of recycling waste and managing scarce resources. One can even argue that China has lost its sense of what China’s priorities could or should be. The societal transformation is driven by the ambition to learn from the most advanced market economies and to do better than these in the shortest possible span of time. It is fuelled by the political interest to lead the developing world in challenging the OECD countries.

China favors dialogue and debate over military action, but it is uncompromising in most of its international positions, which are determined by the interest of satisfying first and foremost China’s economic growth and national interests. Only in a second instance is the government prepared to form alliances on global issues or to join an international action as an equal participant. While China has become aware of its weight in international affairs and the global economy, its leadership still tends to take a standoffish attitude on most current international affairs. Those in the Chinese leadership who advocate for a greater recognition of the country’s international responsibilities are woefully few. China’s foreign policy and commitments are crudely anchored in domestic needs and requirements. China’s growing, but still little documented foreign aid is only one of the many expressions of this limited engagement. China thus does not live up to its own confession that it carries a special global responsibility due to its economic prowess (third largest national economy in the world in 2009), population size (one fifth of humankind) and historical legacy (more than 2000 years of uninterrupted tradition of a national state).

Most troubling are two aspects of this failure to live up to its global responsibilities:

One is the reigning supreme of the technocrats. The visible expression of such blind commitment to technological advances is China's space program. While China, which for all intents and purposes has the size of a continent, could and should make use of space technologies to reach all corners of the country with digital communication networks for educational, health and other civilian purposes, it wasted time and resources to fly a Chinese into outer space. Nobody doubts that China can do all of these things. But does it have to do them? What does it have to prove and to whom? Resources are still scarce to lift every Chinese out of poverty. Hence, judicious choices over how to spend public funds are still required, if China does not want to fail in its ambition to raise the living standards for the vast majority of the Chinese population.⁴⁸

The second troubling development is China's current uncritical worship of economic growth and development. While China's top political leaders understand and search for a more balanced way forward, they have not yet succeeded in finding the instruments for steering the economy and the society at large in this direction. From my own occasional personal participation in discussions with China's top leaders, I know that they realize that the country has to progress on all fronts, and that the reforms of the political structures are equally important. Yet, the current policy of small steps is too little, too late in order to produce the needed philosophical paradigm shift. Unscrupulous entrepreneurs and corrupt officials are not held in check. The grievances of those left behind or left out, are often not heeded until it is too late, and violence erupts. China will need a comprehensive overhaul of its governance structure and political culture fast, if it wants to secure and maintain the enormous achievements it has made since 1949, and in particular since 1978.

During my last two years in China I was constantly on the lookout for openings of such governance changes. While the traditional compo-

⁴⁸ By 2003, the Gini coefficient, which measures the gap between the richest and the poorest quintile of a population, had risen to levels which signal gross inequalities and the country showed local incidents of discontent to prove such a result. While in 2001 there were some 20,000 local disturbances reported, this number had grown manifold a few years later.

nents of our program were growing by leaps and bounds, I explored many avenues for such reforms, but there always was a kind of obstacle that was difficult to overcome. It was very difficult to define cooperation programs for reforms which would produce a real change in the governance system. Chinese officials were hesitant to carry through successful experiments within the timeframe that we saw as needed as this meant to confront opponents in the party and the society whose personal interest did not lie in such a change. After the terrible human suffering and destruction which the Maoist campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s had produced, and with the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution still fresh on their mind, Chinese leaders are loathe to engage in any confrontation which might lead to similar fights. Yet, the free flow of information, the diversification of political powers, the development of strong rules for political, economic and social conflict resolution, in short all the instruments for a more balanced and equitable development are sorely missing in today's China.

Chinese policy-makers, who were open to strengthen these instruments, were asking for more time referring to the time it had taken other more advanced countries to institutionalize such checks and balances. It is certainly correct, that economic and political change in European countries over the last 300–400 years have not gone hand in glove at all times, resulting in many wars, colonization and outward migration of many Europeans to other parts of the world. But China is economically developing faster than any other country has so far. Hence, it also has the need to change its political structure and culture faster than the other countries did. While the political culture is undoubtedly changing, such change is not sufficient, and to inject the ordinary Chinese with more than opportunistic interest. The lack of civic engagement is visible everywhere, and it is not clear how China's leaders intend to change this situation.

Sad to leave

I was sad to leave China. It had been exhilarating years and a marvelous learning experience. When I started in 1998, I was bringing my accumulated managerial and program knowledge to bear. As time passed I learned to hone my skills as a UN resident coordinator. In this role I had no institutional power. If I wanted my other UN col-

leagues to do something which I considered important I had to convince them. They had to trust me, that what I wanted was in the best interest of the UN and our host country China. Living in China gave me the sense of seeing history in the making. The longer I stayed, the more I became aware that any contribution UNDP and the UN system could make would be small, but nevertheless important. In order to stay relevant, we needed to constantly seek and find those Chinese partners who were pushing the reforms forward. In this search we had to become much more politically sensitive and we had to take risks. We needed to point out the shortcomings of the economic reforms on large segments of the Chinese population, and we needed to deal with the downside of China's integration into the global economy. With regard to the latter I realized quickly that these downsides did not only occur in China, but were those of the globalization process. China's social and environmental problems became very similar to those faced by other countries. Many developing countries were overwhelmed by these challenges, most OECD countries pretended to do something about it, but were deficient in their response, e.g. to climate change.

Looking ahead

When my assignment was nearing its end I had several options: I could take early retirement and call it quits. I could try to get into a UN position which gave me the opportunity to deal with global issues. I also could ask to be exceptionally extended in China for another two years. In the end, I opted for the post which gave me the chance to deal with global issues by accepting the offer to join the WHO team of Assistant Director-Generals and to be in charge of globalization, environment and health.

The portfolio of issues this cluster was dealing with was fascinating. Teams of professionals from many different countries were working on aspects of environmental health, like chemical, radiation, food safety, and the impact of climate change on human health. All of these were fairly new to me and I was in for a steep learning curve once more. I was glad that on the other hand I could continue to deal with access to safe water, sanitation and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), to which I had given a lot of attention during my work in China, and had already gathered knowledge.

Although the MDGs were largely defined in terms of human health as a proxy for human well-being, WHO as the primary international public health agency had not fully integrated these goals in all aspects of its work program. The cluster I was to head would have to spend considerable time and effort to disseminate these goals with their targets and indicators throughout the organization, so as to give the work of WHO a greater MDG orientation. In fact, we had much greater difficulties in convincing our colleagues at Headquarters that WHO's work demanded greater attention to the MDGs than our colleagues in the regional and country offices. They were faced with the problems of achieving the MDGs almost daily.

Another department was handling human rights, ethical standards and global trade issues and their impact on health. For good measure, two organizational orphans were thrown into this cluster, too, which would give me the greatest headaches: country office coordination and the follow-up to the WHO report of 2001 on *Macro-Economics and Health*. The cluster was somewhat a potpourri of issues, but each and every one was very interesting, and I was looking forward to getting involved in these topics.

I was not sure what being back in Europe would feel like after my globally peripatetic life of 28 years. As a safety blanket I still had the UN, but I was approaching the end of my UN career, and it was time to prepare for a return to life in a European setting.



The Sky Is the Limit

7. Coming Home To Europe: Geneva 2003 – 2005

I did not have much time to nurture my sadness over leaving China, nor could I spend much time to reflect on what life in Europe might mean to me. After a few days at home, I flew to Geneva, where it was planned to introduce on 21st July 2003 the new Director-General and his hand-picked team of Assistant Directors-General to the rest of the organization. A full staff meeting was organized in the Executive Board room and all regional offices were connected via video-links. After Dr. Lee, the Director-General, spoke we one by one briefly introduced ourselves. I was thrilled! By making use of the electronic communication technologies we were able to reach out to all corners of the organization.

After a short press conference followed by an equally short introductory session with the staff of the cluster I was to lead, I proceeded to take my annual leave until the end of August. I went home and attended to house and garden. My ageing mother needed more attention than in the past, as did a childhood friend, who had fallen professionally on hard times. I invited both of them to a trip with the Glacier Express from Chur to Zermatt, which my mother had wanted to take for many years. For me, this was a golden opportunity to see parts of my new country of assignment, Switzerland, and to reconnect to a country which I knew partly from summer vacations during my youth and from short stays in Geneva during my postgraduate research.

Back in Europe and what it means

I enjoyed and loathed to be back in good, old, comfortable Europe. I was glad that my re-entry was cushioned through my continuing involvement with the UN world. But the UN organizations are not immune to their social and political environment. The culture of preserving status and living standards and requesting the strict observance of entitlements from which I had run away some 28 years ago, was alive and strong in Geneva, and it permeated WHO. I came from China with its “can do” dynamic, before that I had lived in New York with its “if I make it here, I make it anywhere” attitude, and I had stayed

in Africa with its approach that “life is lived day by day as best as we can”. Now I was back in the land where people were right or wrong, where people were part of society or excluded (real or imagined). WHO staff had adopted this European attitude. In the workplace this meant that they behaved as staff, expecting supervisors to take special care in recognizing their performance and their rights. If they did not like the suggestions and requests from their supervisors, staff would ignore such guidance and do what they thought was best for the organization. We were all committed to goals and objectives, but they were not necessarily the same, and we certainly had different ideas and expectations on how to fulfill them. As a result, there were many frictions and unending discussions, which could easily have been avoided if a greater team spirit had existed.

I had to recall my experiences from my student days in order to understand this environment of individualism, dissatisfaction and righteousness. The source of dissatisfaction was always something or somebody beyond the staff’s control. It never occurred to those who moaned and groaned that maybe their own lack of engagement in a larger team was the source of their sense of professional isolation. Many of my colleagues also felt socially isolated. They lived in France and worked in Switzerland, and had no real sense of belonging to either country. I wanted to avoid such a divided situation and opted for living in Switzerland, although I knew from my earlier stays in Geneva in the early 1970s that it was very difficult to have Swiss friends in Geneva. I was inclined to rent a place in a Swiss village near Geneva in the hope to become a temporary member of the Swiss community, as I had heard some foreigners had succeeded in doing. After 20 years of living in big metropolitan areas like New York and Beijing, I considered such an option as very attractive. However, when I noticed the traffic jams every morning and evening going in and out of Geneva I decided against the pain of such a commute. I rented an apartment with all the usual amenities. Being able to walk to work, or to drive from the underground garage in my residential building to the underground garage at WHO within 10 minutes was a luxury I did appreciate in the end more. The lakeside parks were a short detour on this easy commute, which I could take after work or during the lunch hour to get my daily exercise. I continued to settle into a comfortable and convenient life. After several months of hesitations I joined one of the

most exquisite health clubs of Switzerland. The fees were high, and the club gave itself the air of exclusivity, which I normally do not like too much. But eventually I went for it, partly because the options were remarkably few. I never regretted the expense, as it gave me a welcome respite from the frustrations of daily life, and there were plenty.

Organizational restructuring— one more time

The new Director-General was pushing his Assistant Directors-General hard to come to a more rational distribution of tasks and responsibilities between Headquarters and the regional and country offices. He basically wanted policy work and standard setting¹ to be carried out at Headquarters and operational activities to be funded and carried out by regional and country offices.² In support of this clearer division of labor, he was willing to allocate a greater share of budgetary resources to the regional offices, and to slim Headquarters. He made us, his Assistant Directors-General, responsible for making this shift in using the organization's technical and financial resources more efficiently and rightsize our Headquarter departments. This proved to be an almost impossible task, as in particular regional directors were not willing to cooperate with us, who had been appointed, while they had been elected by the member states in their region. Nevertheless, in several areas WHO Headquarters departments succeeded in establishing a networking approach between Headquarters, regional and country offices. In such cases the three levels of the organization allocated a greater share of their respective financial resources to where they mattered the most, namely at the country level.

¹ These are very important aspects of the work of the specialized organizations of the UN system, and mostly overlooked by the general public. For instance, professionals in my cluster developed and issued water quality standards which were to be observed by all member states. Interestingly enough, resistance to such standards came not always from developing countries, but often from OECD countries. Policy work mostly took the form of a global strategy on a particular issue, which was adopted by the World Health Assembly. The WHO secretariat then had the task to report every five years on the implementation status of the strategy by member states. And although no sanctions could be applied in cases where there was a lack of implementation, member states still took pains to not appear on the list of countries which were in default of the strategy.

² While OECD countries are expected to define and fund the implementation of such international strategies with their own means, developing countries can upon request receive technical assistance from WHO (provided funds were available).

Based on my previous professional experience in UNDP, I had the least problem to adopt the approach demanded by the Director-General.³ I convinced in particular the directors of the department for environmental health (Dr. Margret Chan) and of the food safety department (Dr. Jorgen Schlundt), and we pulled their programs in the desired direction. As a result environmental health issues relating to food safety, chemical and radiation safety gained a higher profile on the agenda of regional meetings and in WHO country programs. In spite of the fact that we continued to work with scarce financial and staff resources at Headquarters, we actually ran larger programs in terms of global outreach, because we succeeded in coordinating financial resources and staff with our offices in the regions.

Our technical colleagues in the regional offices responded very well to our initiatives, and they were grateful that we reached out to them more than in the past. Regional directors viewed me, as did other ADGs, with suspicion, but I arrived at an acceptable *modus vivendi* for both sides (possibly because I had previously worked during my UNDP years in 5 out of the 6 regions). The working arrangement we reached allowed us to proceed with our science based policy work at Headquarters. Through frequent consultations we connected such science-based policy work better to the ongoing plans and programs of the regional and country offices.

A new driver for the green agenda: public health

The green agenda had been pretty much exhausted everywhere around the turn of the millennium, and many environmentalists were defining ecological problems in terms of their negative impact on human health. Yet, the health community, as represented in WHO, took barely note of this evolution and the heightened interest in an environmentally oriented global public health agenda. Many external requests to WHO from the scientific and NGO communities as well as the business world for reliable information, studies and research remained unanswered. Partly, such demands were kept pending, because we had not received a mandate from our governing bodies, partly because of a lack of funding and technical expertise. I thus es-

³ In fact my experience with software development efforts in UNDP was very helpful to me to negotiate a workable solution. See above chapter 5.

tablished a schedule for the coming sessions of our Executive Board to take at least one if not two of the work areas of my cluster to the Executive Board and the annual World Health Assembly. We wanted to hear from the representatives of our member states what they saw as priorities, and what they wanted us to work on. At the same time, I also was interested in informing the Ministers of Health what was expected of them by other interested parties, outside of the public health field and to obtain a legitimate basis for a greater share of budgetary resources and the possibility to recruit new staff members.

By and large our topics (such as the relevance and importance of the MDGs and food safety) went through the governing bodies without too much controversial debate. Some member states had misgivings about WHO getting involved in issues which they considered to be outside the scope of the organization's health mandate.⁴ This was especially true for international trade related issues regarding drugs and medical equipment. Yet, we were inundated by requests from many developing countries to help them to deal with WTO and especially TRIPS⁵ related issues. In 1995, WTO members had entered into an agreement which dealt with the trade related issues of intellectual property rights. For the health community this topic was of particular relevance with regard to protecting the knowledge and products of traditional medicine and the results of clinical research which was carried out in their countries without being direct owners of the results.

In many instances, the debates on the topics of my clusters proved to be enriching and the resolutions coming out of the sessions of our governing bodies were often much better formulated than what we as the secretariat had proposed. I remember the case of a report and draft resolution, which some member states had asked us to prepare on the ethical dimensions of organ transplantations. While we had gotten all the aspects "right" with regard to the technical and medical

4 A strong undercurrent of all work WHO does is the question how to define "health". Those with a medical background tend to define it as disease control; others are more inclined to define "health" as dealing with all determinants of health and seek to impact those in order to avoid the outbreak of major diseases. In today's world, of course, a balance has to be struck between the two positions. My cluster obviously was working on determinants of health, and could not always convince the disease control proponents of the importance of our work.

5 In August 2002, WTO and WHO eventually published a joint study on "WTO Agreements and Public Health". TRIPS – Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights

aspects, we had underestimated the concerns of some member states about organ trading and “medical tourism” as they called it, i.e. the use or abuse of the difference in national standards and practices which allowed those who could afford it to travel outside their country and receive transplants which they would not have access to in their home country.

Giving food safety a higher profile

I was most successful in mobilizing WHO governing bodies with regard to food safety. Related issues began to be on the agenda of the WHO Executive Board every year. Partly, this was initiated by my cluster; partly this was in response to requests from member states. Our interest was to anchor the standard setting work, which we did jointly with FAO in the context of the *Codex Alimentarius*,⁶ in the work priorities of WHO. Because of a general lack of regular budget allocations, WHO often was accused by FAO and its governing bodies of not taking the work of the *Codex* seriously enough.⁷ As these food safety standards were until then the only international standards which WTO recognized and applied when dealing with agricultural trade, it was even more urgent for WHO to take notice and to speak up about the health related aspects of food safety. Food crops which had been genetically modified were continuously a topic for discussion, although the health community was hesitant to make clarifying statements. Too little was known in their view. While this was certainly true, I nevertheless felt that a more proactive research agenda was warranted. While negative health effects of GM food has not been identified so far, I considered it crucial to continuously undertake risk assessments based on principles developed by the *Codex*. Our food safety experts advocated for post market monitoring, in order

⁶ For more information see www.codexalimentarius.net. The work of the Codex there is defined as follows: “The Codex Alimentarius Commission was created in 1963 by FAO and WHO to develop food standards, guidelines and related texts such as codes of practice under the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Program. The main purposes of this Program are protecting health of the consumers and ensuring fair trade practices in the food trade, and promoting coordination of all food standards work undertaken by international governmental and non-governmental organizations.”

⁷ The budget of any UN organization has two components: a regular budget, funded from assessed contributions, and an extra-budgetary component funded from voluntary contributions. The first component is to fund the core activities of each organization.

to evaluate the safety of GM foods for human consumption. Some health ministries were more receptive than others. However, the evolution of GM foods is a shared responsibility of ministries of health and ministries of agriculture. Both are generally not known to be easy partners for interministerial cooperation. Fortunately, in this instance WHO and FAO were speaking with one voice and we urged our respective community of ministers to cooperate closely with each other, which helped to ease the interministerial tension in several cases.

The governing bodies of both FAO and WHO agreed that the respective technical departments should actively pursue the GMO issue. If necessary, we were asked to commission research, but they did not give us the financial resources for such studies. At the department level, we were thus asked to square the circle, although there were some external sponsors willing to fund such research. But this was not an area where we wanted to invite outside sponsors with ties to the industry to fund these studies. Even the appearance of being beholden to the industry would reduce the value of such studies. However, philanthropic foundations and aid agencies had not made food safety one of their priorities, and we thus had to limp along with our own meager resources.

A very hot item in the area of food safety was baby food. When cases of bacterial contamination of manufactured baby food with *E. sakazaki* and *Salmonella* in US hospitals were reported, causing the death of several infants, our food safety department sent out an alert to all member states. Immediately, several NGOs were on our back demanding that we should declare all baby food as being unsafe and recommend that ministries of health in developing countries should restrict or even ban the import of manufactured baby food.

In spite of the fatal consequences of contaminated prepared baby food, upon the advice of my food safety specialists I was not ready to have WHO recommend such severe restrictions. I could always think of situations where it was necessary to give manufactured baby food to infants. The food safety department had initiated the process of setting food safety standards for prepared baby food and had organized a first expert meeting. This is always a first step in an elaborate process of setting international health standards. The report of the meeting framed the issues which needed to be dealt with. But some NGOs

were impatient and either ignorant or not satisfied with our approach. During the World Health Assembly in 2004, several NGOs persuaded delegates of a group of developing country to demand a debate of a draft resolution which these delegations had prepared in close collaboration with the interested NGOs.

I and my colleagues held a series of meetings with the delegations sponsoring the resolution and advised them that if they insisted on presenting it and asking for a vote, it would not pass easily without a full debate. In view of the importance of the subject matter and in view of our work which was underway, we asked them to postpone a discussion to the next Executive Board meeting/World Health Assembly to allow for a thorough preparation and everyone's buy-in. We knew that many—if not all—industrialized countries would have major problems with the proposed draft resolution and we did not want to have a dividing line between member states because of unsatisfactory statements.

At a general discussion at the end of the 2004, WHA confirmed our assessment, and the matter was postponed, but fortunately not “killed”. Instead, the WHO food safety department was asked to prepare a status report of what ongoing work WHO was carrying out, and to prepare a revised draft resolution which all member states would be able to adopt.

By now the manufacturing industry was alerted and was lobbying me and the director of the food safety department against the adoption of a resolution. In the past, WHO staff and managers were very reluctant to speak and meet with the representatives of industries interested in the work of WHO. I had no such reservation, basically because I knew that if we could explain to them why our standard setting work was important and in the end even useful for them, they would acquiesce. And right I was. After we had spoken to the representative of the baby food manufacturing industry, they understood that the initiative was not directed against them, and that it was in their interest to have internationally recognized food safety standards applied to their products. Rather than to serve the industry, we wanted to alert medical personnel in hospitals (where most of the recorded deaths had occurred) and other consumers, who used manufactured baby food, to be mindful that such food never could be considered totally steri-

le and had to be handled with special care and precaution, especially when adding water or milk. We also wanted the industry to issue such warnings on their products. In addition, we wanted to receive a strong mandate from WHO's governing bodies to give health related food safety considerations a higher profile in the work of the *Codex* and to strike a better balance with the trade related issues.

Interestingly enough, when the Executive Board received our report and the draft resolution, they established an open-ended working group in order to reach a consensus on the final text of the resolution. When the unanimously adopted resolution went to the World Health Assembly it was re-opened again, and an unusually large working group wrestled for days over a final text going through the draft prepared by the Executive Board sentence by sentence. It was a painstaking process which, however, led to a consensual decision. Only some of the original sponsors were dissatisfied that the matter had taken that long and had been taken out of their hands. The NGOs which had been active in the background were openly rejoicing as they felt that they had forced an issue on the WHO agenda. They believed that the issue would not have been dealt with. It was a mute point to quarrel over with them!

In the end, due process had been followed and we had a decision which was sound and acceptable not only to the members of WHO, but also to other stakeholders, although it had short-circuited the usual, elaborate and solid standard setting process, which we resumed with even greater energy on the basis of the WHA resolution.

Adopting the MDG as a blueprint for future public health work

At the same WHA session in 2005, my cluster was equally successful in introducing into the WHO community the MGDs as a blueprint for future work. Of the 8 MDGs⁸ 3 relate directly to public health issues, others were indirectly relevant. Yet, the WHO secretariat and the WHO governing bodies had never adopted the MDG agenda. We

⁸ Namely goals: 4. Reduce child mortality, 5. Improve maternal health, and 6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Indirectly relevant were goals: 1. Reduce poverty and hunger, 3. Promote gender equality, 7. Sustainability and access to safe water and sanitation as well as 8. Global partnerships.

launched an organization-wide campaign to strengthen WHO's commitment to the MDGs, and in 2005 the WHA adopted a comprehensive resolution basing a good part of WHO's work on the achievement of these goals. Not only was this a good step in the direction of making public health globally a developmental task, it also helped to tie in WHO's work better with the work of other UN organizations, such as UNDP and UNICEF, which committed themselves to the MDG agenda much earlier and had given it central importance in their programs at the country level.

Obstacles to be faced: human rights, macro-economics and health, country coordination

As I was becoming more familiar with the way WHO worked and felt more at ease in the organization, it appeared that the Director-General of WHO had second thoughts about my appointment. He had chosen me as a candidate from another UN organization in anticipation of UNDP selecting one or two senior WHO staff members for positions of UN resident coordinators. For a variety of reasons this did not happen. I thus realized and had repeated hints that Dr. Lee wanted to reverse his earlier decision regarding my transfer. Although I brokered a meeting between Dr. Lee and the Administrator of UNDP, Mark Malloch Brown, when he was in Geneva, and which by all accounts went very well, this did not change the situation. I therefore had to accept that my two year contract would most likely not be renewed in September 2005. Since this date coincided with my turning 60, I was prepared to let things take their course. Especially as in spite of the achievements I reported on, the cluster fell short of our objectives in other work areas.

One such area was the application of human rights to public health systems. Rights violations in the health sector were many. My colleagues and I thought that greater attention to the human rights angle by public health authorities could strengthen their hand in sensitizing parliaments and other national authorities to the need of overcoming any form of discrimination in the health system against gender, age or location.

The Director-General, however, was reluctant to let this part of our work become subject of deliberations in our governing bodies. AIDS,

emerging new threats to public health such as SARS, maternal health and the treatment of women in the health system were issues which individual scientists and some public health strategies had examined through a rights-based lens. But Dr. Lee was adamant: this was one issue he did not want on the agenda of the Executive Board or the World Health Assembly. In his view they had the potential of disrupting what was until then mostly smooth sailings on major reform issues for him and his administration. Among others, he had reclaimed a prominent WHO role for fighting AIDS, malaria and TB, he had established an early alert system, which effectively kicked in as the threat of the Avian flu as the next killer virus for humans loomed large on the horizon, and he had made WHO to be a less fractured organization, with many more collaborative efforts between Headquarters and the regional and country offices than ever before. In recognition of these changes he had obtained the agreement of the member states for an increase in the overall budget, something unheard of in decades for any UN organization.

Public health and human rights

I knew that it was unusual for WHO's governing bodies to pursue a human rights agenda as a priority. Yet, so many public health issues remained unattended in too many of the member states, so that approaching this lack of attention from yet another angle might have helped increase attention and resources. Public health officials, especially when they have a medical background, are extremely reluctant to consider anything but medical responses. Dr. Lee, himself a physician, intuitively assumed that our proposed human rights strategy would possibly run into deep water, although I had informally secured Chinese and US support. However, given my tenuous position with Dr. Lee, I did not pursue the human rights issue vigorously, in spite of my own personal conviction. But I gave staff dealing with human rights issues a lot of leeway in sensitizing other colleagues throughout the organization. Dr. Lee treated this approach with benign neglect, which was a workable compromise to both of us.

Two work areas in my cluster posed a constant headache for me, for very different reasons. One was the area of macro-economics and health. Jeffrey Sachs had convinced Dr. Brundtland, Dr. Lee's pre-

decessor, that WHO should make a stronger effort to give macro-economic policies a stronger component of pro-poor and pro-health measures⁹. Dr. Brundtland, as a former Prime Minister, had embraced this approach without any hesitation. Thus Prof. Sachs and a team of economists and WHO staff had published a report in December 2001, which received a lot of international attention. When I joined the organization it was a question of disseminating the results to a wider audience among the WHO member states. The Gates Foundation had given a multi-million dollar grant to WHO to carry out this dissemination work, and a small secretariat was integrated into my cluster which was to coordinate and stimulate these follow-up activities at the country, regional and global level.

This work area was also not a priority for Dr. Lee and he was signaling to me to shut this effort down. I thus found myself between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, countries in all regions were responding very well to the report and were undertaking their national studies. On the other hand, the funding by the Gates Foundation was coming to an end, and Dr. Lee did not authorize us to pursue fund raising efforts. We thus let one staff member after the other go and completed ongoing work, and did no longer respond to requests for other follow-up action. By mid-2005, we were ready to close the secretariat and to consider the program to have completed its course. Whatever remained to be done, we were folding into the MDG agenda package. It was one of those occasions, where a UN organization was ignoring a strategic issue. From around the world our feedback was that public health standards could and would only be maintained or improved if health systems and their structure and funding would be the focus of attention. Dr. Lee regrettably did either not see this or did not want to see it. This was beyond his scope of understanding and comprehending “health issues”. In spite of the fact that he did not contradict the expressed views by several ADGs, facing the fact that WHO should be focused on public health and systemic issues as on disease control and prevention, his heart and mind were focused on the latter. Dr. Lee

⁹ These are short-hand expressions for the demand that macro-economic policies should develop economic and fiscal measures which would produce a positive impact on the reduction of poverty and the improvement of health conditions in a country. The World Bank and other development banks have for instance established benchmarks of how much of a country's GDP should be allocated for these purposes, and which incentives or subsidies would be most appropriate.

did, however, tolerate a discussion on strengthening health systems. But this took place outside my cluster.

Working as one WHO

In yet another work area Dr. Lee and I did not see eye to eye. As a consequence, staff working in the department of country focus was less successful than all of us had expected. As mentioned earlier, Dr. Lee was willing to rearrange the division of labor between regional offices and Headquarters. In exchange for increased financial and staff resources to the regions and country offices of the organization, he wanted to have the last say on staff appointments, especially the appointment of WHO country representatives. Although the Director-General always signed appointment letters, in the past such a signature was more like rubber stamping than the confirmation of a well founded decision. Dr. Lee very much wanted new representatives who as active members of the UN country team would promote convincingly health and development issues, and would help overcome the divide between regions and Headquarters. As one measure he wanted the best country representatives to rotate among regions to make them flag bearer of the whole organization.

He thus expected me and the department under my supervision to serve as the quality control unit for new appointments of WHO country representatives. While I fully understood his intentions and saw the significance of his attempt to influence the selection process, he and I on the one side and my staff and the regional directors on the other could not agree on newly established criteria which would guide the selection process. Initially, the department in my cluster was controlling the flow of funds for country allocations which were to be authorized once a country cooperation strategy had been formulated and approved by the regional office and the technical departments at Headquarters. This had given us some leverage to influence the work and staff appointments at the country level. But these funds were flowing slowly, because the changes which we wanted to see introduced were slow in coming. Other demands, such as AIDS, nutrition, and epidemic disease prevention demanded more funds than they had received in the approved budget, and consequently the country focus funds were reduced and our leverage diminished.

Without any financial resources to offer, there was almost nothing we could do in the cluster to influence the selection of country representatives—and frustration crept into the process. Dr. Lee was furious that he was the one who had to stop many nominations; he had hoped that our department would do so. Regional directors blamed us, when their nominations were queried or stopped and consequently bypassed us more and more, and the staff in the department was frustrated as they had less and less funds to convince country offices to formulate and agree with the government of their host country on a multi-year strategy, which could have been used, among others, to define the professional profile of candidates for the post of WHO country representative.

I knew from my years with UNDP that the selection and appointment of country representatives was a fierce internal power game between the regional directors and the head of the organization. I had no particular interest to get into the middle of this. In my view, we were a cluster carrying out technical work. We were not responsible for personnel management. In my view, the quality control of the candidates who were proposed and selected should rest with our personnel department and not with us. Such functional understanding was so alien to the WHO management culture that I got little sympathy, except from our management and administration cluster and grudgingly over time from Dr. Lee. Nevertheless, he still expected me to be “his” watchdog, but at the same time, he was taking all the means away from me to fulfill this role. I decided to let it ride, and only intervened when asked by him or his office in specific cases. Then I did the necessary phoning back and forth, although by then, our personnel department did no longer want me to get engaged! It was truly a no win situation for me. To make things worse, the director of the department was keeping me less than well-informed about individual processes and when I reminded her of her obligation to keep me in the loop, she threw a tantrum and complained about me to the DG’s office. It was one of the most frustrating situations I had found myself in since working for the UN.

But as in the back of my mind I was getting ready for retirement. I did what a good manager and supervisor should not do: I neglected the work areas which were a constant source of professional frus-

tration to me and focused my attention on the supervision of those areas which did well, namely environmental health and food safety, especially as the directors of these two departments were easy to work with.¹⁰ Nevertheless, nagging doubts remained about such selectivity, and the level of frustrations rose and drained my energy.

Getting reacquainted with life in Europe

In order to recharge my energy, I often went after work to the health club and explored the surroundings of Geneva on weekends. Many expatriates living in Geneva were travelling long distances on weekends to go to Northern Italy or to Southern France. Traffic permitting, this was easily doable, although it involved long hours of driving on auto routes, what I tried to avoid. Therefore, I preferred to roam around in the Jura Mountains and in the Alps of Switzerland and neighboring France.

Lake Geneva and its surroundings add up to a most varied and vibrant metropolitan area. Between the cultural, recreational and culinary offers in towns and cities like Geneva, Lausanne, Nyon, Rolle, Montreux on the Swiss side, and Evian, Thonon and Yvoire on the French side and many picturesque villages in-between, there were many weekend outings possible combining a hike in the Jura mountains, a good meal and/or a visit to an interesting exhibition in the many museums which dot the shores of the lake. My favorite drive was along the Vallée des Joux with a stop in the monastery of Romainmoutier (where the café offered the best fruit cakes I have ever tasted) and back down the Col de Mollendruz. On a clear day, coming down from the pass towards the lake, one would have a most spectacular view over the Swiss and French Alps with Lake Geneva at their feet. Ambling back to Geneva over the small roads through the vineyards rather than over the busy autobahn or the lakeshore road closed off a day of leisure and educa-

¹⁰ The director in charge of environmental health was Dr. Margret Chan, who originally had been chosen by Dr. Lee as one of the ADGs, but China insisted in posting another high ranking official at that level. Margret was thus brought into my cluster at the level just below the ADG grade in order to gain some time and experience, and to elevate her at an appropriate moment to the ADG level. That the Chinese had miscalculated, and Dr. Lee was right in his judgment of Margret's potential was confirmed when after his sudden death in 2006, Dr. Chan was elected as Dr. Lee's successor with an overwhelming majority and in the first round of voting. By then, the government in Beijing had realized how valuable Margret was to them, and that she offered the first chance for a Chinese to head a UN organization.

tion. On a foggy winter day, when the sky hangs heavy over the lake and Geneva, it is only a short ride up the mountains to catch the sun and ski or walk on the snow covered slopes. Although reaching the top of the Saleve (Geneva's landmark mountain) took a bit longer, the views from up there were stunning, and some of the hikes under overhanging rock faces were truly breathtaking while at the same time still easy to do.

I particularly liked the remnants of a strong socialist and civic tradition in the cantons of Geneva and Vaud. Most foreigners living in Geneva are not even aware that Geneva used to be a workers' town with commensurate political influence. A system of excellent public libraries¹¹, public swimming pools and free entrance lakeside beaches attest to this past, which is actively protected by strong civic movements. In Geneva today, these facilities are often used by immigrant families from the Balkans and the nannies of Arab families with the children in their charge. Swiss families have moved out of town into the surrounding villages, where they built houses or rent them. By contrast, the town of Nyon, which has attracted a great number of Anglophone residents, offers open shops on Sundays and cafés, where one can sit for hours on end and read the Sunday papers before having a late lunch. And only a few miles up the slopes of the Jura is the viewing point of the Signal de Bougy overlooking the lake region with a huge outdoor restaurant which caters to the needs of families with low incomes. Hardly any diplomat or UN staff member finds their way to this excursion point.

Even on rainy days a large number of museums were there to visit from the luxurious and exquisite halls of the Foundation Bodmer in Coligny to the romantic chateau of Prangins and its exhibition of 19th and 20th century toys. Lovely gardens and parks were easily accessible with a jewel like the *Jardin des Cinq Sens* in Yvoire. The owners of the Chateau d'Yvoire created a small garden with a medieval layout in which plants and birds addressed the sense of seeing (color), tasting (fruits), smelling (aromas), finding (leaves and fruits) and hearing (an aviary with local birds). It was a lovely visit in each season of the year and I took most of my visitors to visit this exceptional site.

¹¹ This library system inspired Lenin, who lived for a while in Geneva during his exile, to create similar institutions in the Soviet Union.

On some weekends, I travelled a bit further into the Alps. One of my favorite rides was through Chamonix to Martigny and back along the lakeshore to Geneva. A stop at the Foundation Pierre Gianadda, a private museum which mounts several art exhibitions per year and has a sculpture garden with works by modern artists, was the midway point allowing for a meal and a visit to an exhibition which had come from Paris or Milan or similar places. These weekends were slowly but surely also preparing me for a “normal” life within the European society and without a full time professional engagement.

Going out with a flourish

But before I entered retirement, I had to represent WHO at two major events. One was the first Conference of the Parties for the POPs¹² convention which took place in Punta del Este in Uruguay in April 2005. WHO’s department on chemical safety had been deeply involved in defining the health endangering substances and had participated in formulating the convention. It was now called upon to help define the needed implementation mechanisms, in particular survey instruments to monitor the impact of the convention on those countries having signed and ratified it. The conference had a big flaw. Government delegations were exclusively among themselves. Yet, the manufacturing industry, distributors and consumer representatives should have been invited as the other major stakeholders. I said so in my intervention on behalf of WHO, in the hope that at the next conference manufacturers were not only there to exhibit their products, but to participate in the debates, answer to questions and listen to the observations of other stakeholders. Equally important would be the participation of NGOs in order to give them visibility and hold them accountable for their statements which they were so far only able to make in the corridors of the conference venue to a selective audience.

The other major event I attended on behalf of WHO was the annual meeting of the *Codex Alimentarius* Commission¹³ in Rome in April 2005. Among others, the food safety departments of FAO and WHO had to report on a global meeting which FAO and WHO had organi-

¹² This abbreviation stands for “Persistent Organic Pollutants”.

¹³ For the role and mandate of the Commission see above footnote 127.

zed in Bangkok in the fall of the year before. We had invited representatives from all food safety authorities around the world. China came with a delegation of 20, most attending at the cost of the Chinese government. African countries had difficulties to send two representatives, who often were all their country had as a food safety authority. These countries which needed access of their agricultural products to the markets of the industrial countries most urgently were not ready to cope with the ever more stringent food safety standards.

Apart from the stumbling block of farm subsidies in the US and Europe for the competitiveness of agricultural imports from developing countries in their markets, food safety standards would not allow such imports if they did not meet agreed food safety standards. African countries by and large were very ill prepared for observing these food safety requirements either domestically or for their export crops.

Trade and health protection were intimately interlinked, but few producers and traders would know about these interdependence. It thus was important for WHO to raise its voice and to ensure that human health would be given the needed attention by those advocating more trade. The conference had been an eye-opener to the African delegations, who met repeatedly behind closed doors in order to discuss how they could address this weakness once they were back in their respective country. They devised goals and strategies in order to overcome the state of unpreparedness of African economies to participate fully in the international trade of agricultural products.

At the same time it was also important for the health community to show a stronger interest and engagement in the field of food safety. In many countries the respective authorities were either part of the Ministry of Agriculture or under their supervision. Although it was important to have producers and the relevant ministries fully on board, it was equally important to have consumers and their representatives fully engaged. Ministries of Health were in this context indispensable. As one of my parting shots I promoted a *Codex* related resolution calling on WHO's governing bodies to take regular note of the *Codex* standard setting results. A few weeks after the Commission's meeting we had the World Health Assembly pass a resolution asking the WHO secretariat to report regularly to its sessions on the work of the *Codex Alimentarius*. We had thus taken a huge step closer to receiving po-

licy guidance from the representatives of WHO member states, i.e. Ministries of Health, to provide input into the work of the *Codex*. There always were tendencies to criticize WHO for the lack of financial support to the running costs of the *Codex* machinery. At the same time, the *Codex* secretariat and bodies wanted to have as little policy guidance from either FAO or WHO. This would have left trade considerations as the dominant theme, in particular the interests for trade mark protection of specific products. This, however, would be far too narrow as a focus, and we needed to mobilize support for a broader agenda. Just as an illustrative example: the Commission had discussed the issue of standards for protecting the label of Parma ham for eight years, without finding a solution.¹⁴ This in our view represented a massive waste of time – focusing on trade protection measures rather than on health relevant issues for consumers.

The final “good-bye”

These events were bittersweet experiences. On the one hand, I was glad to no longer having to attend such huge gatherings, which I never had been particularly fond of. On the other hand, it was clear that so much more remained to be done and I would have gladly continued to make a contribution. But I also was painfully aware that there were problems in my cluster which I would not be able to solve. I knew that I would not miss having to face these issues. I therefore was looking with some relief and some regrets forward to the end of my professional and personal journey with the UN. As this part of my life was coming to a close, it was time to move on to a new phase of my life.

¹⁴ The focus was not on which safety standards ham should meet in order to be labeled as Parma ham, but rather on protecting the ham produced in the Parma region of Italy from any competition of producers in other parts of the world. It was a typical case where trade considerations overshadowed all other important aspects.



The Less Dramatic Skyline of Berlin

8. Life Beyond The UN

Ever since I had returned to Europe from China, I was preparing myself for a life after the UN. For a short period I was contemplating to settle in New York, but then I decided to return to Germany. Consequently, I was looking for an apartment in Berlin, as Berlin was the only place where I could picture myself as a retiree from an active professional career. In anticipation, I sold my apartment in New York towards the end of 2004, as I was eager to invest the proceeds into another property in Berlin. A friend was kind enough to send me the weekly real estate sections of the Berlin newspapers and so I could acquaint myself with the market. Once or twice I had flown to Berlin over long weekends to look at several offers, but each time I could not make up my mind. In mid-July 2005, I decided to fly to Berlin and to take a decision there and then. An agent had selected three apartments for me to look at in the area I was interested in. Each apartment was okay, but had nothing by way of a special feature. As we were about to part the broker said, there was still a penthouse available in a street nearby, and asked if I might be interested in seeing it.

So we went, and I was immediately charmed and decided that I would take it. On my way back to Geneva, I was wondering whether I had taken a hasty decision. But today I know it was a good decision which I have not regretted since. The way was thus free for me to move from Geneva to Berlin anytime during the summer of 2005.

How to manage this transition was now the question. There were still many things I wanted to do and see in Geneva and in and of its surrounding areas, I also wanted to make the move as smooth as possible. I thus did two things: 1. I arranged for the movement of my household towards the end of September and I was taking my accumulated leave as of mid-July, 2. I signed up for a new cellular phone subscription in Germany and a mobile Internet connection. This allowed me to be virtually in Germany, while physically still being in Switzerland. Many phone calls or e-mails from Germany reached me while I was hiking in the mountains or visiting friends in Switzerland, France or Northern Italy.

In the last week of September I drove from Geneva to Berlin while my household goods were moving by truck the same way. I arrived a day earlier so that I could guide the movers upon arrival. Within a few days my apartment was livable and I started to make contact with friends and acquaintances in order to organize my life. My interest was in doing two things: teaching at a university and working in an honorary capacity with and for an NGO. I contacted my alma mater, the political science department of the Freie Universität and I established contact with Transparency International. Without too much difficulty I was given the green light for holding a seminar on the United Nations¹ and to work with a working group under the German chapter of Transparency International dealing with corruption in public health. I also accepted to serve as a senior advisor on corruption in health systems to the staff of the international secretariat of Transparency International which is located in Berlin. Occasional speaking engagements let me share my knowledge and experience with a younger generation. As a member of a WHO advisory group to the global “Good Governance Program in Medicines”², I am also staying in touch with my former life. But on the whole, I am taking the time to connect with friends and family members for which I did not have enough time before. I brought my 85 year old mother to live near me in a comfortable residence for senior citizens, where she is cared for, and I am at hand to spend more time with her in the outer years of her life.

My radius of movements has become smaller, but not less interesting. Having returned to a re-united Berlin and Germany, there are plenty of places to discover in the capital’s surrounding region. As I write

1 The title of the seminar was “UN: Increased Demands, New Challenges and the Need for Reforms”. I was positively surprised by the keen interest the students showed and amazed by the lack of their knowledge about and of the UN. If in a country seeking to play a more prominent role in the work of the UN, such poor general knowledge exists, what might be the case in countries where governments do not care much about the work of the UN? We have to realize that each generation has to be educated to seek the resolution of conflicts through peaceful means, and in order to succeed as much training has to occur as we give young recruits of the army to learn the use of weapons and the strategy and tactics of military interventions. Maintaining or restoring peace is as hard as fighting a war. But we still do not seem to fully appreciate this. A peaceful world is not one free of conflict, but it is one free of violent fights.

2 For details on this program see www.who.int

these notes, some 18 years after reunification, many cities in the former German Democratic Republic have been beautifully restored, and are a true discovery, even for a well seasoned traveler. The towns of Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern und parts of Sachsen Anhalt were in their prime in the late middle ages and the early years of the reformation. Many lost in relative importance since, but kept intact, albeit in poor condition, especially during the years of the GDR. But generous funding from the EU, the German federal and state governments and many private investors are bringing these towns back to life restoring their beautiful buildings, mostly of the renaissance and baroque period. Many Germans do not know the treasures of this part of Germany. I am no exception. But having seen a good part of the world, visiting some 120 countries in the course of my professional career and having lived in three continents outside Europe, I am ready and eager to see more of my own country.

Do I miss the world of the UN? Yes, there are moments when I miss the openness of spirit, the positive thinking, and work in a multicultural community.

Was it difficult to come back? Yes and no. It was difficult to see, hear and read about the unwillingness of a major part of the German society to embrace change. For 28 years I had worked and lived the advocacy for change—which is called development. I returned to a country which was stagnating. People preferred to complain about all the things they did not have, rather than to look at what they had and how to make the most of it. Many in the new states of the federation were little prepared for living and working in the social, economic, legal and political system of the re-united country. A whole generation had grown up in the GDR and had no idea what it meant to integrate into the new societal structure. Integration was in fact the only offer on the table for them. In discussions with friends and family I often was the odd one out, seeing opportunities where they could not detect anything positive.

Many Germans, in particular in the area of the former GDR remained unemployed. Some of those were working and making money on the side. Everybody knew about it, but little was done to overcome the situation. The federal government had encouraged through various schemes to give these working unemployed a certain degree of sup-

port, in order to get people out of the moon shining and off social security payments, but the society was not ready to accept so much personal freedom and risk-taking. Big corporations were thriving in export markets, small companies which had found their niche, were equally successful, but the economy was not growing and the government debt burden was rising. In parts of Berlin, there was widespread poverty, and newspaper reports seemed to suggest that the problems were intractable. Random street violence committed by young people and even children was reported on a daily basis, but apart from some courageous community-based efforts, the society at large did not really seem to care. It was a dismal state of affairs that I found in Germany in the summer of 2005.

Through miscalculations, the governing coalition went for advanced general elections in September 2005, and lost. Instead, the reform-reluctant and the reform-willing public voted into office a coalition between the conservatives and the social democrats under the first ever female Chancellor, who came from the Eastern part of Germany. All of a sudden confidence returned and things started to fall into place. The economy grew, modestly, but sufficiently to increase public revenue and to stop the mounting of public debt. People began to find work, and consumer spending increased. Within two years, the country was moving again and finding its way out of its doldrums. It showed how much knowledge, wealth and human energy there is to be mobilized by the right mix of public policy measures and private freedom. I had seen similar recoveries in the US under President Clinton, but I had rarely seen such managed ups and downs in those developing countries I had come to know a bit better. China being a case of and onto itself: racing towards an economic success which was increasingly enmeshing the country in ever growing contradictions and social conflicts.

I had for 30 years lived a privileged life with lots of support from colleagues in the office and household staff. Now I was a private citizen adjusting to a life where I had to go to the local government offices to register myself, as there was no one who would do so for me. I was pleasantly surprised to find most officials I had to deal with were polite and service-oriented. Procedures had been streamlined and made

easy for the individual citizen to comply with. The re-entry could not have been easier.

Given a comfortable pension after 30 years of an uninterrupted career I can work on a volunteer basis. This gives me the freedom to be engaged on a pro bono basis, while at the same time not facing the stress of having to be successful in any particular way other than what I want to be successful in.

I am glad to be home in Germany and I am particularly thankful that I could return to my home country. Not all of my UN colleagues can do this. In today's world this is something to be extremely grateful for.



Was It All Worth the Effort?

III. Post Scriptum: Was It All Worth It?

I have recorded my professional and personal life with the United Nations for several reasons. The first was to respond to the repeated demands by younger colleagues and students that I should write down my experience. Another reason was that I wanted to conclude this part of my life with a critical review of what I had done and achieved, or failed in.

My life was unique, and cannot be repeated. Yet many of my experiences will be similar for anyone who chooses an international peripatetic life. The current wave of globalization may demand of more and more people a mobile lifestyle. Learning from those who did it before might help them to manage more easily the pitfalls of such a life.

In two ways I belong to a pioneer generation. Women were still the great exception in the early 1970s to enter a professional career after their university education. This was especially true for women in Germany at the time. Family life and professional work were mutually exclusive. A choice had to be made. And even those few who choose to combine an active professional life and family responsibilities did so in different ways.

Combining family and professional demands

Some married, had children and divorced, others had children and raised them as single parents, some married an older spouse who was able to follow his wife, others married artists, who were mobile, while others choose what was called a “significant other” and lived in a loose partnership. Those who had siblings adopted the children and families of their brothers and sisters as theirs. None of us lived thus alone and a lonely life, although our personal life was always “work in progress” and defied conventional practices. In fact, those of us who lived a more conventional life often faced severe personal crises, as conventions did not help to face the special demands of a mobile life. Even when families stayed together, the parents often left a huge legacy of social disorientation to their children. Living as a modern nomad can only work, if and when one goes the whole mile, and leaves behind the

lifestyle of the ones left at home. This does not mean that we who live an international life forget about our families, in particular our parents and children; it does not mean that we carelessly move from one relationship to the next, it only means that commitments are made as earnestly as elsewhere, but responding to the special demands and pressures of the required mobility, with periods of separation due to family or professional commitments.

Working as a pioneer

I was a pioneer also with regard to my nationality. The two German states entered the UN in 1973. I was recruited in October 1975. There were not many Germans who had worked for the UN before my generation and who could mentor us new recruits. One of my professors had worked for the ILO in Geneva during the 1950s, but his advice and guidance was less than useful. Mostly, he was raving about the salary he had received, which was at the time much higher than a professor's at a German university. But I entered the system at a very junior level; hence the salary was not significantly higher than what I earned as a junior lecturer. The offered salary was thus the least important of my motivations. Only much later did I begin to care for the grade I was at: promotion to a higher grade brought a higher salary, but more importantly it opened the chance to be considered for the most interesting assignments the organization had to offer.

Motivation to work for the UN

What had drawn me to working for UNDP outside Europe was to escape the confining social conventions of post-war Germany and to experience first-hand other cultures and their traditions. It was the multicultural experience which lured me and which in the context of the UN led to a work and lifestyle which was in almost every aspect international. It meant that we showed and shared our national customs with each other, while at the same time learning about customs observed by others. It made us aware of the richness of different nationalities and helped us reflect on our own culture. Such heightened awareness can, of course, be gained through many other assignments or experiences abroad. What was the added dimension in the work of the UN community is the conviction that any issue has to be open for debate

and that for any problem a solution can be found, provided the political will and the intellectual, managerial and financial resources are available. While in any national setting, we are often focused on why something cannot work—in the UN we are always interested in finding what will work. We are obsessed with finding solutions and removing obstacles. The spirit which drives even the most tedious bureaucratic process at the UN is one of hope and optimism. Failures are seen as temporary setbacks, but not as final defeats. It is this spirit which is exhilarating, and makes working for the UN exciting.

Experiencing different cultures

Working as a modern nomad in very different cultural settings also taught me to reflect on my own cultural heritage and to learn from those I lived in. Of course, I never became an African, an American or Chinese, but there were aspects in those cultures which contrasted my own of post-war, post-Nazi Germany. In Africa I enjoyed the spontaneity of emotional contact, but I also noticed the glass wall between Africans and foreigners. When I first came to Africa, the colonial past was only slightly more than a decade ago, and Africans quite understandably were searching to define the path to their future from their own cultural roots. While, in particular those educated in the system of their former colonial masters were outwardly very similar to us, they were at the same time keeping a critical distance in order to find a new legitimacy rooted in their own culture. Their heritage of previous generations obviously weighed heavier than the legacy of the colonial period which had barely spanned three generations in most cases. For instance, a post colonial national leader like Jomo Kenyatta had been born in a tribal society which was not yet part of a British colony.

Even though the African culture is not easily accessible, the little I learned about it and from it was accepting the value of a lifestyle and outlook on life which was fundamentally different from my own.

The US on the surface appears as an extension of the Anglo-Saxon European culture. But this was fast changing in the years during which I lived in New York. Besides, even without these rapid changes during the 1980s and 1990s, there are features of daily life and social interaction which are distinctly different. What I enjoyed most and took over into my own set of cultural values and habits is the American

habit of emphasizing the positive. It helped me to leave behind my German habit of fighting the good with the demands for the perfect. Rather than seeing the flaws in a person, a product or a process, I focused my primary attention on the achievements or positive aspects. Positive reinforcement is such a more powerful tool for achieving improvements than criticism of weak points. Even today I experience the motivating and empowering effect positive assessments can have, when I review the papers and presentations of my students.

The UN work style

Quality in my own work was always my highest goal, but I also learned to accept inputs. I thus learned to appreciate team work and adapted pragmatically to a consultative working style. Developing a common view and perspective became more important than the defense of my own way of seeing things. Of course, accepting the inputs of others demands that the right balance has to be struck between self-confidence and claiming recognition for the personal contribution. In a competitive environment like the US society, the protestant ethic of humility does not always make it easy to defend one's interest against the claims of others. In a multi-cultural setting obtaining recognition without appearing to be self promoting is a particular challenge. The UN is most probably the pinnacle of a multi-cultural setting and provides an unparalleled learning environment for team work and respect for the views of others.

Personal freedom comes at a cost

Living in the US and in particular in New York made me aware that there was a high price to be paid for the limitless choices and the extreme focus on individual well-being. The flip side of such great freedom is, at least for a middle class person, a constant feeling of insecurity. Most of my friends had so internalized this fear, that they managed their lives with it rather well. But some went to regular sessions with their psychologist in order to clean their heads and emotions of the accumulated anger, fear and frustrations. Observing their anxieties, I became proud of my heritage of solidarity, which allowed similar cleaning of emotions and thought patterns through an active circle of like-minded friends. The US also made me aware of our elabo-

rate social security systems which give weaker members in the society a chance or is taking care of those who cannot do so by themselves. While I was attracted by the opportunities of rapid social advancement the US society offered, I also knew that the vast majority of US Americans would not experience such advancement in their life. Life in the US gave me a strong sense of ambiguity about unlimited individual freedom on the one hand and a deep seated feeling of insecurity on the other.

The culture which came closest to my own heritage was the Chinese culture. In China I truly felt like a fish in water. In many ways the Chinese culture is the anti-thesis to the American culture. Everybody has his or her place in life, and while this may often be a constraint on personal freedom, it also gives a strong feeling of belonging. Each category of foreigners (e.g. foreign experts, diplomats, UN personnel) had clearly defined rights and privileges. In some regards, life was thus predictable and easy to manage. On the other hand the fast and vast changes in China were constantly challenging all kinds of categorization. As long as one played by the Chinese rules, such challenges were accepted and on more than one occasion acted upon. I enjoyed both assignments in China, as they offered to work and live within a clearly delineated position with plenty of opportunities to stimulate further changes. It was the paradigm of “continuity and change” which attracted me to China and made me feel comfortable there.

Learning from China

During my second stint in China one aspect was most surprising and enriching. Due to the greater openness of the Chinese to debate with us foreign partners I realized that the understanding of a situation very much depends on the perspective from which one looks at it. This can, of course, lead to relativism, which makes almost anything possible. Unless there is set of common values guiding social and individual behavior, opportunism reigns the day. Living by values requires a lot of dialogue in order to resolve a problem and to find a solution which all who are directly concerned can accept. The current Chinese political culture is full of vibrant discussions inside the party and the government, and increasingly through the media in the general public. This is something which is mostly overlooked outside China. While

the Chinese society today is influenced by competing values, political decisions at the top often are informed by the advice of scientists. I found this feature later again in my work in the World Health Organization—and learned to appreciate it. I believe that scientific advice is very beneficial to get a handle on new and emerging issues. I am convinced that for sound policy-making, applying scientific knowledge will become more and more important in future political debates and decision-making. It will be equally important to create public awareness of the issues and the options for solutions and to allow for public debates about policy options. Political decisions will need to be solidly grounded in adequate information and knowledge and based on majority views. The Chinese political system like most democracies today is struggling with getting the balance right between what is required or appropriate for the common good and what corresponds with the expressed interest of the majority of the population.

Debate a prerequisite for managing change

During my years in China I learned that a lively debate with controversial views is an indispensable prerequisite to manage change. It is the only way to form majorities which will accept changes to their life. In my own country, such debates are very rare and consequently decisions on social and economic changes are not easy to obtain. I sometimes wonder how we can so readily forget the deficits in our own country and point with fingers to those of others. But that is another story. I had lived a life of many changes, and had neither lost my roots nor my sense of belonging. I retained my almost childish curiosity of meeting and understanding new persons and places. My nomadic life instilled in me the conviction that changes are invigorating and that the opening of new horizons hold the promise of finding new and sometimes unexpected solutions or answers to what may have appeared before as intractable problems.

Work for the UN—privilege and obligation

Working for the UN put me from the first day in a privileged position in a small and big way. When I boarded the flight to my first assignment in October 1975, I overheard the stewardess say to a colleague that there was a “UN person” on board. I had been placed as a VIP

in the front row. As a student I had taken the flight from Berlin to Frankfurt innumerable times, but never had I been placed in the first row. Throughout the years, I took the privileges of a UN official¹ as an obligation to help others who were not enjoying such exceptionally enabling circumstances and to work towards solutions which could and should apply to many. Moments of greatest joy were for me when I could use my privileges to help find such solutions for others.² Finding solutions beneficial to others was the overarching theme for my work in exchange for the privileges which life granted me. Generally speaking: to work in the field of UN development cooperation is a great privilege. It allows staying focused on the technical aspects of a development challenge, and it limits the influence of the pushes and pulls of local or national politics to a minimum. As the representative of a UN aid organization I was given access to the highest level in the government and in the society without the usual restrictions. Hence, I could share ideas, proposals, recommendations at the level of those who take the decisions, and I could make them without the fear that they were distorted in the transmittal through the bureaucratic chain. Of course, I also knew that for external ideas to take hold, it is indispensable that a local process secures the needed buy-in by all concerned. Patience and perseverance is certainly one of the greatest competency demands for any development worker; especially when working for the UN. Under certain circumstances it is not even the best way to begin a dialogue at the highest level. In China for instance, it was very important to prepare the working level first, and only approach the highest level when I could be sure that the working level would support my ideas and proposals, when they were asked by their superiors for their views.

Sense of satisfaction

I experienced many instances where my ideas were picked up by “the powers that be”. But it was also necessary to remain realistic about the prospects of implementing such ideas. The UN’s strength does not lie in providing huge sums of funding to back up the realization of ideas

¹ These are: being trusted, respected and given preferential treatment in daily life.

² Moments of greatest sorrow were those when I heard or read about UN staff being powerless, abused or even killed. Fortunately, I was never directly confronted with such failures.

and proposals. The UN's strength is knowledge: knowledge about the local as well as the international conditions and systems. To me as a UN official this meant to be constantly on my toes and to acquire such knowledge sometimes under trying conditions. Officials in many developing countries operate still under the premise that knowledge is power, and consequently information about the way a bureaucracy or a political system worked was not easy to obtain. The danger is then to operate on the basis of gossip and unsubstantiated information, and that invariability is an unreliable basis. In a bureaucracy, people are transferred and in a political system they change, hence a network built on personal contacts is too fragile to form a sustainable foundation for promoting change and development. I had to consult constantly a variety of contacts and written sources in order to arrive at sound information and acceptable views and judgments. Advice and recommendations based on solid information create trustworthiness, but it always is a long and arduous way to get to that stage.

The UN – promoting civilian development

UN development cooperation is focused on civilian development such as agricultural, educational, health development. After 1989, good governance and democratization became overriding concerns, but the UN development system would not deal with national security issues. Even cooperating with national police forces or prison administrations to strengthen the observance of human rights standards by these forces was against the conventional wisdom of many of my colleagues. Defying such conventional views was a particular intellectual and professional challenge to me. Both in Malawi and in China I engaged with the concerned national police or prison authorities who were very grateful that the UN was willing to help them and it gave me great satisfaction, when we obtained the desired results.

The UN's influence in a given country and government is limited. I was rarely in touch with foreign investors, traders and military partners, except in the early reform years in China when representatives of foreign companies came to see the UNDP office staff to seek our advice on how they might access this huge market. Many of these visitors were referred to me and they not all liked what I had to tell them, although my predictions in most cases proved to be correct. In general, external

and internal economic and security interests impacting on the decisions of governments and national leaders are beyond the reach of the UN development system and other aid organizations. More than once the development work of many years is wiped out in a few months of civil war. I was fortunate in never being assigned to a country where such violent conflicts erupted. But there were instances, where other interests were stronger than what the UN stood for and we had to accept our powerlessness while at the same time pursuing a reform agenda.

Being at the top – clear ethical standards are indispensable

The longer I worked in the UN and the higher I climbed in the hierarchy, the more I was entrusted with the responsibility for managing staff and handling ever larger volumes of financial resources. In the later years of my second assignment in China, I had delegated authority to approve all projects and administer a project portfolio of US \$ 50 million a year. Evaluations and auditing of my decisions were done post facto. An enormous responsibility rested on my shoulders to get things right from the start, and to motivate staff whom I entrusted with some of my delegated authority in carrying out their daily tasks and duties to do the same. In the one case of fraud and collusion which I had to uncover and then to rectify I learned that the observance of clear professional ethics is indispensable in order to avoid mismanagement and corruption. No management system can be strong enough to ensure integrity, unless the people involved take their decisions according to ethical standards of integrity. The signals coming from the top manager are, however, extremely important. In a situation of societal change this is not always easy to achieve.

Often old understandings of honesty and appropriateness have fallen in disuse and new ones have not yet been fully accepted.³ The whole notion of avoiding *conflicts of interests* is very alien to most societies in developing countries, and so the accumulation of power and influence in a few hands is paramount. It was a constant challenge to keep true to

³ At the time that I finish these memoirs, the international financial crisis is hitting hard. As one of the origins of this crisis is the abolition of solid and generally accepted banking standards. Instead, new instruments were developed and applied without due regard to the overall consequences.

our mandate to achieve national ownership of our projects and programs which benefit the poorest of the poor – while at the same time to retain accountability for the proper use of the resources which we made available.

Management skills and competency – a requirement for success

Apart from a strong moral and ethical commitment I needed solid management skills, many of which I had to learn on the job. In more than one case I succeeded in making the impossible happen by obtaining a change of existing rules and procedures because they were for the circumstances not adequate. When this happened, obtaining the change was deeply rewarding. But even a change process has to observe due diligence, and to get staff and external partners to adhere to such due diligence was a special managerial challenge.

Unique demands on the UN development system

Accountability demands did not distract, but reinforced my attention to the purpose of development cooperation through the UN system. I felt that as the UN we had a distinct responsibility from other aid organizations. We had to find solutions to problems which in the local context were unusual and new. We had to motivate the local decision-makers to apply such solutions. Often our colleagues from other aid organizations acknowledged that we succeeded where they had failed, because we were the UN. The reason for this success was that our national partners knew that – as the representative of the UN – I had no ulterior motive than to assist in solving problems. It was this impartiality which eventually convinced even the greatest skeptics in adopting a UN position: strictly on its technical, moral or efficiency merits. However, to obtain acceptance demanded of us all the best possible negotiations skills and management competency, and long hours of intense work.

UN development cooperation – avoiding military conflict

Sometimes I was asked why I worked so hard. In essence it was my conviction that war and armed conflict were avoidable provided the right amount of human and financial resources, knowledge, and the

political commitment to invest in civilian development were available. Negotiating solutions which conflicting interest groups could accept, were preferable *at all times* to the violent alternative. As a child of the post Second World War era, this was an all consuming and overriding motivation for me.

I was lucky that I was only assigned to countries and functions where I could prove this conviction to be working. Regrettably, there are many places in the world, where the international community, and in particular the UN, lack the right level of resources, knowledge and skills to protect people from the sufferings of armed conflict. As I write these notes, the conflict in Georgia erupted, and all concerned misallocated their resources and miscalculated the effects of their interventions, while UN peace-keeping forces stood by powerless. It is painful to observe such failures.

The future of development cooperation

The longer I worked in development cooperation the more I became aware of the limitations of such cooperation and the importance of other forms of cooperation. Trade, investment and scientific and technological exchanges are equally important, some would say more important for a country to develop and to raise the living standards of its people and their understanding of today's world. The philosophy of Western aid organizations is that publicly funded aid should be separated from economic cooperation in order to avoid a collusion of interests. The Chinese aid programs are not following this philosophy and are bundling trade, investment and aid in integrated packages. They are undertaking such cooperation on the basis of mutual interests between the recipient nations and themselves, while Western countries are giving a global rationale to their aid programs, but are separating their global concerns from the policies and programs which they pursue domestically. For instance, poverty, defined as social exclusion and marginalization, only exists in developing countries; in OECD countries this same poverty is strangely labeled social and economic vulnerability. Sooner or later, Western aid organizations may have to rethink their philosophies or stand accused of supporting the application of double standards. Aid programs should follow the same principles as those which are applied in a donor country in order to

enhance their credibility. UN programs should be built on the universal human rights standards.

Determinants of peace and stability

The still prevailing view is that international peace and stability depends on negotiated agreements between nation states. Through my professional work I became convinced that in the 21st century such international agreements will only be worth the paper they are written on when governments are determined to translate these agreements (like international conventions) into action. Much will depend in this regard on whether public administrations will be able to relate convincingly such international agreements to the needs of the majority of the people in their country. Nation states will remain for the foreseeable future an indispensable tool to manage the international system and to give political structure to societies.

However, if states cannot respond adequately to the demands of their populations, in particular of their ethnic and other minorities, such inability will inevitably lead to exclusion and ultimately social instability and war. While women are by no means in any country a minority, if and when they are not given free access to equal opportunities in the society, peaceful development suffers. In many countries Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus are by no means the minority, and yet the dominant nations in the world still show a great lack of understanding and ability to negotiate with leaders in those countries showing understanding and respect for the rationale of their basic beliefs. We all see and suffer the consequence: terrorism. We live in a world where the vast majority of governments have signed up to the protection of human rights, but we see and experience a general lack of interpretation how such protection should be reflected in daily political and economic decisions. Development cooperation can help to enhance our capacities, in particular the development cooperation done through the UN system.

Development cooperation – limitations and opportunities

When I retired in 2005, funds for development assistance were on the rise, although far off the goal of 0.7 percent of GNP of the richest nations. The international community had given itself a global business

plan in 2000 for 8 goals to be achieved by 2015. At the mid-point of this 15 year period, many of the goals looked that they might not be achieved in many countries by 2015. The goal on partnership was added at the last minute, but such partnerships, in particular between the private and public sector, are slow in developing. Often they lack transparency and thus are open to mistrust and allegations of corruption.

In spite of its limitations, I am of the view that development cooperation works. In countries which are not attractive to direct foreign investment and which have few items to trade on the international market, development aid is sometimes the only access to international know how and foreign exchange. Both are indispensable to buy external goods and services. At its best, projects of foreign technical assistance prepare the ground for larger public or private investments, or they help devise public policies and initiate the implementation of such policies to overcome social and economic inequities. They strengthen domestic forces which care and are interested in the right and equitable development. At its worst, foreign advisors remain ignorant of the domestic opposition and resistance to change and the challenges of development. In such cases, the implementation of projects languishes and results are difficult to obtain. Often managers of aid programs lack then the courage to call it quits and to start afresh from a different vantage point.

Achieving sustainability

During my professional work period, there were overriding constraints for UN aid technical assistance programs: We always lacked resources to see an initiative through to the level of sustainability.⁴ It was less a problem in China, where national resources would secure such sustainability when results had been as expected. It always was a problem in African countries to replicate or scale up the success of a project, even when the World Bank or other public funding became available. The economies of scale were rarely obtainable, and the repayment of loans was in the long run a greater burden on public budgets than the gains from these investments, e.g. in the health and education sector. These investments were indispensable for the development of

⁴ Sustainability is defined as a social and economic process which continues on its own momentum.

the economies, but they became unsustainable, when the AIDS epidemic rolled in and many of the beneficiaries of higher education who filled positions of leadership succumbed to the disease. Not to mention the fact that the epidemic overwhelmed the public health institutions. Besides, many of the well-educated medical and educational personnel left their countries and settled abroad. Rethinking the blueprint for development cooperation was thus a necessity.

The greatest weakness of development cooperation is, however, the underlying blueprint for development. Official development aid (ODA) is funded from the tax payers' money in the most developed countries. Helping poor people, especially after a natural disaster, is something tax payers willingly support. They want ODA to realize results which they can understand and relate to. This is particularly true for development assistance funded and carried out by national organizations. But there are also international organizations like the World Bank and UNDP. These organizations are one step removed from national interests. Member states have mandated them to assist struggling economies in a globalized world to become competitive economies. This is very difficult to be convincingly explained to many tax payers, in particular when they believe that globalization has cost them their jobs. And yet, as part of a world which is becoming ever more interdependent, we do not have a choice. Either we take our money and know how where the vast majority of the world's population live or these people will come to us with their social and economic problems. Solidarity and mutual respect and understanding which as political concepts have gone out of fashion in Western countries is what we need today more than ever, if we want to make the world a better place to live in. Very often, international organizations are held hostage by the interests of the largest donors. During most of the 20th century, the USA was in the UN and in the World Bank the largest single donor. US policies were often overpowering as was the impatience of US governments, when international civil servants pointed out and pursued different ways and means to help developing countries to come to terms with the needed changes.

I am more convinced than ever that multinational organizations and actions are required to maintain peace and stability and manage economic growth with equity. The recent banking crisis has shown that

only concerted action by several big economies can avoid a collapse of the international financial system, but it will not suffice. We need a new international system, and we need to link it better and more directly to the interests of citizens and tax payers.

Passing on the baton

I hope that with these memoirs of my professional and personal experiences I can pass on the baton to a younger generation of committed professionals who will carry on the needed work for peace and development and who will fight the frustrations and retain the never dying hope for a more peaceful and stable world. In order to do that, they will have to find and negotiate solutions which we were not able to obtain.

IV. Annex

List of Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
CCA	Common Country Assessment
CCTV	Central Chinese Television
CTA	Chief Technical Advisor
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GNP	Gross National Product
ICT	Information and Communications Technologies
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JPO	Junior Professional Officer
HDI	Human Development Index
HDR	Human Development Report
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
HQs	Headquarters
LDC	Least Developed Country
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MOFTEC	Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NPD	National Project Director
NSB	National Statistics Office (China)
ODA	Official Development Aid
OECD	Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development
POPS	Persistent Organic Pollutants
RFA	Reserve for Field Accommodation
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
TOKTEN	Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals
TRIPS	Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
UNDAF UN	Development Assistance Framework
UNCDF UN	Capital Development Fund
UNDTCD UN	Department of Technical Cooperation for Development
UNDP UN	Development Programme

UNESCO UN	Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC UN	Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNHCR UN	High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF UN	Children's Fund
UNOPS UN	Office for Project Services
UNV UN	Volunteers
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization



Starting off: Departure at Berlin Tegel Airport October 1975



Talking to the Minister of Education, Military Government, Cotonou 1978/9



During a project visit, China early 1980s



Training session for Chinese officials in the UNDP conference room, 1981/82



Greeting the then UN secretary – general Perez de Cuellar in Beijing, 1982



Farewell dinner Beijing, 1983



*As usual: the only woman among (very nice) men.
Break from a project visit in Tunisia, in the spring 1983*



Turning 40 on the hottest day during a New York summer, 1985



Together with a wonderful UNDP team in Malawi, 1988



Malawi's President and the First Lady receive a UN Habitat award for low cost housing in rural areas, 1989



Visit to Beijing 10 years after and meeting some of the former colleagues, 1993



*Back in Beijing for a second assignment as UN Resident Coordinator.
Visit of the UN secretary-general Kofi Annan meeting members of the UN country team,
March 1998*



The SG posing with most UN staff members during his visit to Beijing, November 1999



*First Visit to Tibet, Spring 1999.
In the background the mountain range with Mount Everest/Mount Qomolangma (left corner)*



Official dinner in the Great Hall of the People on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the People's Republic of China, October 1999



Speaking at one of innumerable conferences, 2001



Holding a small northeast Asian tiger



Meeting Xi Jinping in 2002, then Governor of Fujian, President of the Republic since 2012



Presenting a hand-woven shawl from a UNDP/Finnish project in Tibet to the wife of the UN secretary – general, Mrs Annan, and to the President of Finland, Mrs. Tarja Halonen, Oct/Nov 2002



Member of the WHO Director General's Team, July 2003



Retired and hiking in the alps with friends from high school among happy cows, 2007

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Ms Leitner was born in 1945 in Jena/Germany. However, she grew up in West Germany and attended schools in Düsseldorf und Frankfurt/M. She carried out her university studies in Frankfurt/M, Freiburg/Br und West Berlin. For her doctorate in political science she undertook research in Kenya in 1972/3, and graduated from the Freie Universität, Berlin in October 1975. Immediately after her graduation she joined UNDP and served for this organization in West Africa (Benin), Southern Africa (Malawi), twice in New York and twice in China. Her career was concluded with 2 years at the World Health Organization in Geneva where she served as Assistant Director General for Health and Sustainable Development. Since September 2005 Ms Leitner lives in active retirement in Berlin/Germany.

Sigrid Hacker was born in 1939 in Berlin. She studied German and English literature and linguistics and art history. After her graduation she worked as a language teacher with the Goethe Institute and later as a teacher for German and English literature at the Berlin Kolleg, a college where adults receive the entry qualification for university level studies. Since 1972, she has sculpted in clay and bronze, and has made drawings with charcoal, graphite, and paintings in oil and water colors. Since 1995 she works as a marble sculptress part of the year on the Greek island of Tinos. Ms. Hacker has had exhibitions in Berlin, Athens, Toulouse, Rotterdam and Los Angeles. cultpuress part of the year on the Greek island of Tinos. Ms. Hacker has had exhibitions in Berlin, Athens.