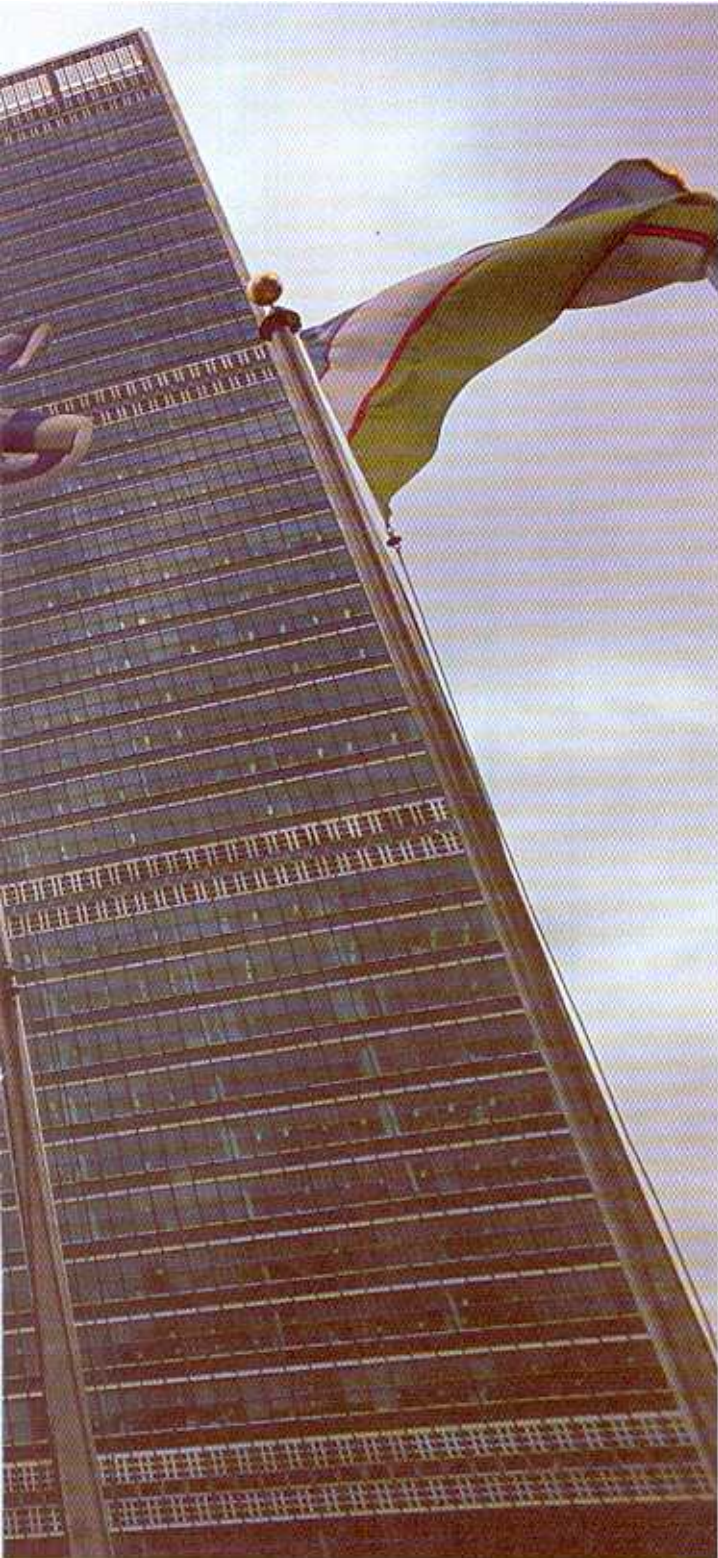


A Sense of Proportion



The United Nations headquarters in New York.

~ shaping a credible strategy



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- *Changing perspectives*
- *New attitudes*
- *Successes and failures*
- *The United Nations' future*

Fifty years is two generations. And two generations is long enough to measure whether there has been a substantial change of direction in how mankind orders its affairs. It is clear that there has. We have been spared a Third World War. The change has affected not only war and peace, but also society's attitude to poverty, economic progress, its habitats, and women and children. In all, there have been strides forward that at the time of the ending of the Second World War seemed barely conceivable.

Yet we have clearly not learned one thing - a sense of proportion.

We are too arbitrary in our measurement of suffering, too beholden to early prejudices and too easily manipulated by the exaggerated and relentless, but fickle, eye of television. The danger is cumulative. As we are fed a random diet of suffering, based on misleading criteria for what is most important, we lose over time not only our discernment but our confidence in our ability to set intelligent priorities.

Strangely, we make the same mistake with successes as with failures. Look at this recent comment of the oft-quoted economist, Robert Heilbroner. The Western world, he says, 'is experiencing the startled realization that the quality of life is worsening - that people who are three or five or ten times richer than their grandparents do not seem to be three or five or ten times happier or more content or more richly developed as human beings'.

But is this not, in large part, because we are fed selective information, by both media and politicians,

“a flimsy reckoning of mankind’s achievements”

that makes us more aware of our failures than our successes? Are we really living, for example, in a more environmentally degraded world than our grandparents, whose industrial cities imposed no controls at all on industrial effluents? And are we not living longer and with less physical suffering too?

For example, Britain is regarded, by some, as hobbled by an antique industrial structure, an imperial nostalgia and a sharp lack of a modern day work ethic. Yet figures published by the Central Statistical Office in January 1994 show that real disposable income – cash left over after taxes, National Insurance and pension contributions – was almost 80 per cent higher than in 1971 and life expectancy is increasing by about two years every decade.

Nowhere is this flimsy reckoning of mankind’s achievements more apparent than the way the inhabitants of the wealthy countries of Europe, North America and Japan perceive the rest of the world – the so-called developing countries – which are widely caricatured as poverty-stricken disaster zones. For the overwhelming majority of the Third World most of it is just plain nonsense.

In reality, in little more than a generation average real incomes in the Third World have more than doubled; child death rates have been more than halved; malnutrition rates have fallen by 30 per cent; life expectancy has increased by about a third; the proportion of children enrolled in primary school has risen from less than a half to more than three-quarters; and the percentage of rural families with access to safe water has risen from less than

10 per cent to more than 60 per cent. The proportion of couples using modern contraceptives has risen from almost nothing to more than 50 per cent – in China it is 72 per cent and Brazil 66 per cent. Average family size is falling in almost every country.

Only a short 70 years ago, 20 years before the founding of the United Nations, child death rates in the cities of the industrialized world were higher than the average for Africa today. In 1990, the UN Children Fund’s (UNICEF) World Summit for Children set a target of reducing child death rates to 70 per 1,000 births in all countries by the end of the century. Already, only five years into this timetable, well over half of the developing countries have reached it. In the 1960s, the under-five mortality rate in Europe was higher than it is in most of South America today.

Ignorance of what progress has been made extends right up to the highest levels of policy-making. If the quality of life can be improved so rapidly, how is it that Western aid agencies allocate less than 10 per cent of their expenditure to meeting the most pressing needs of the poorest – primary health care and education, clean water, safe sanitation and family planning? Developing countries themselves, too, are often just as culpable. They spend only 10 per cent of their budgets on these basics.

We lack a sense of proportion about either success or failure. If only we could face facts rather than accepting so glibly the misleading interpretations others choose to feed us, how much more productive – and happier – we would probably be.

However, it is not just on matters of social and economic development that we too often see the world through a glass darkly. War and peace preoccupy us seemingly more than ever despite the ringing down of the Iron Curtain and the ending of the Cold War.

Countless human beings have been killed in war from 1945, the end of what North Americans, Europeans and the Japanese like to call 'the last war', until the close of the Cold War.

If a massacre on this scale were to result from berserk technology, from a new strain of the plague or from the despotism of a ruthless tyrant, the global flood of human despair and outrage would be incalculable.

So why so much agitated concern in 1995? The world is not worse than it has been; it is probably better. Despite the headlines, we are not killing at Cold War rates. To read the forebodings of the politicians and pundits is to be plunged into the depths of despondency. The world, they appear to say, is spinning out of control.

It is simply not so. The world we live in today, despite Yugoslavia, Somalia, Cambodia, Angola, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Georgia, Tajikistan and Chechnya, has probably rarely, if ever, been so peaceful. Since the waning of the misnamed Cold War, which stirred up hot proxy wars all over the place, the number of conflicts has been on a steady decline. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the number of wars in 1987 was 36; in 1988, 33; in 1989, 32; in 1990, 31; in 1991, 30; and in 1992, 1993 and 1994, down to 27.

The majority of the big 'post-war' killers were the direct consequence of communist-capitalist confrontation – Korea, Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Ethiopia-Somalia, to mention only the principal ones. Added to these there were the great anti-colonial wars, Algeria, Kenya, Cyprus, Rhodesia and, long before they became Cold War conflicts, Indo-China, Angola and Mozambique.

There were the big inter-state wars – Israel versus the Arabs, Pakistan versus India, Iran versus Iraq, and Iraq versus Kuwait and the rest of the world.

Finally, as there still are, there were numerous ethnic or tribal wars.

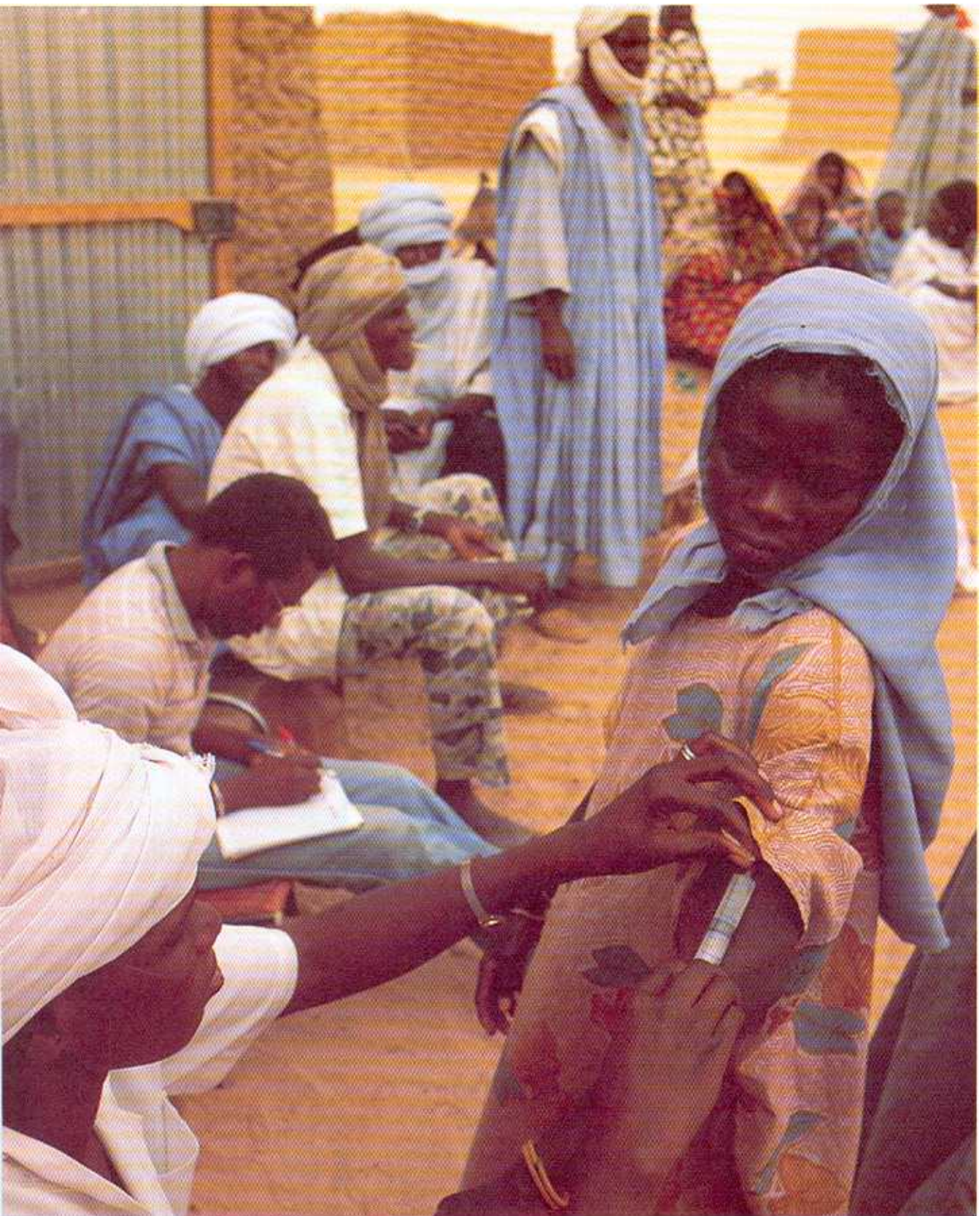
The Cold War is over. The colonial era is over. In 1994 peace was made between Israel and the Palestinians and amongst black and white in South Africa. Peace also came to Northern Ireland. Indeed, right now there are no all-out wars between nations. What then has brought about this awful sense of gloom that pervades the political discourse?

*'we look at
problems
rather
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our eyes'*

Our unnecessarily pessimistic reading of the state of the world reveals a positive aspect – these days we look at problems rather than shield our eyes.

One only has to go back to the great Irish famine of the 1840s, which was effectively brushed under the carpet by official policy-makers. Yet famine today is televised worldwide and scarcely anyone feels unmoved.

It is our perspective, our sense of responsibility and our ability to care that have changed most. And that alone is one of the big achievements of our age. We are members of feeling societies. The question today is how best to mobilize those feelings, where best to direct them and what tools to use. At the same time we have to be aware that often there are no speedy solutions, that persistence is often the most important of virtues and that results or success can come from the most unlikely quarter.



***In little more than a generation, child death rates in the developing world have been halved.
A child is vaccinated against meningitis in Mali.***

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*“we may
live in
the best
of times”*

Since we are dealing with an intangible measuring rod – our perception – it is not easy to single out objectively the hardest-hit sectors of our world. So much depends on personal experience, which few of us have in sufficient quantity to make an informed judgement. The world is just too big. Instead of that we depend on the restless, but deceiving, eye of television which tends to be attracted by drama rather than some objective degree of suffering or need. The ‘silent’ emergencies pass it by. The distress it prefers is ‘loud’ and preferably opinionated.

Thus to make judgements on real need in this fast flowing, but poorly observed, world is not a task anyone, much less the layman, can find easy.

Nevertheless, 1993, 1994 and 1995 do not deserve the fashionable pessimism that has become dangerously pervasive. Unknown to ourselves, we may live in the best of times. Three single steps could help keep it that way – using the UN to tighten controls on the sale of arms and nuclear technology, to deploy the UN’s peacekeeping machinery to more effect, and to step up the pace of the war on poverty. These days the economically advanced countries live peacefully together. Democracies, by and large, do not go to war with each other. War in the 1980s and 1990s is the prerogative of the poorer countries. Once capitalism was thought to be the source of

international competition and conflict; the capitalist was thought the parent of war. No longer. These days it is the poor of the world who destroy each other. Poverty, too easily, makes them the prisoner of the dictator and the warmonger, who in turn can rely on the amoral pursuit of return by mainly Western arms salesmen.

The world is a better place. But such is the nature of life on earth that change, driven often by the technological motor of post-industrial life but also by wider education and new styles of life, constantly throws up new problems.

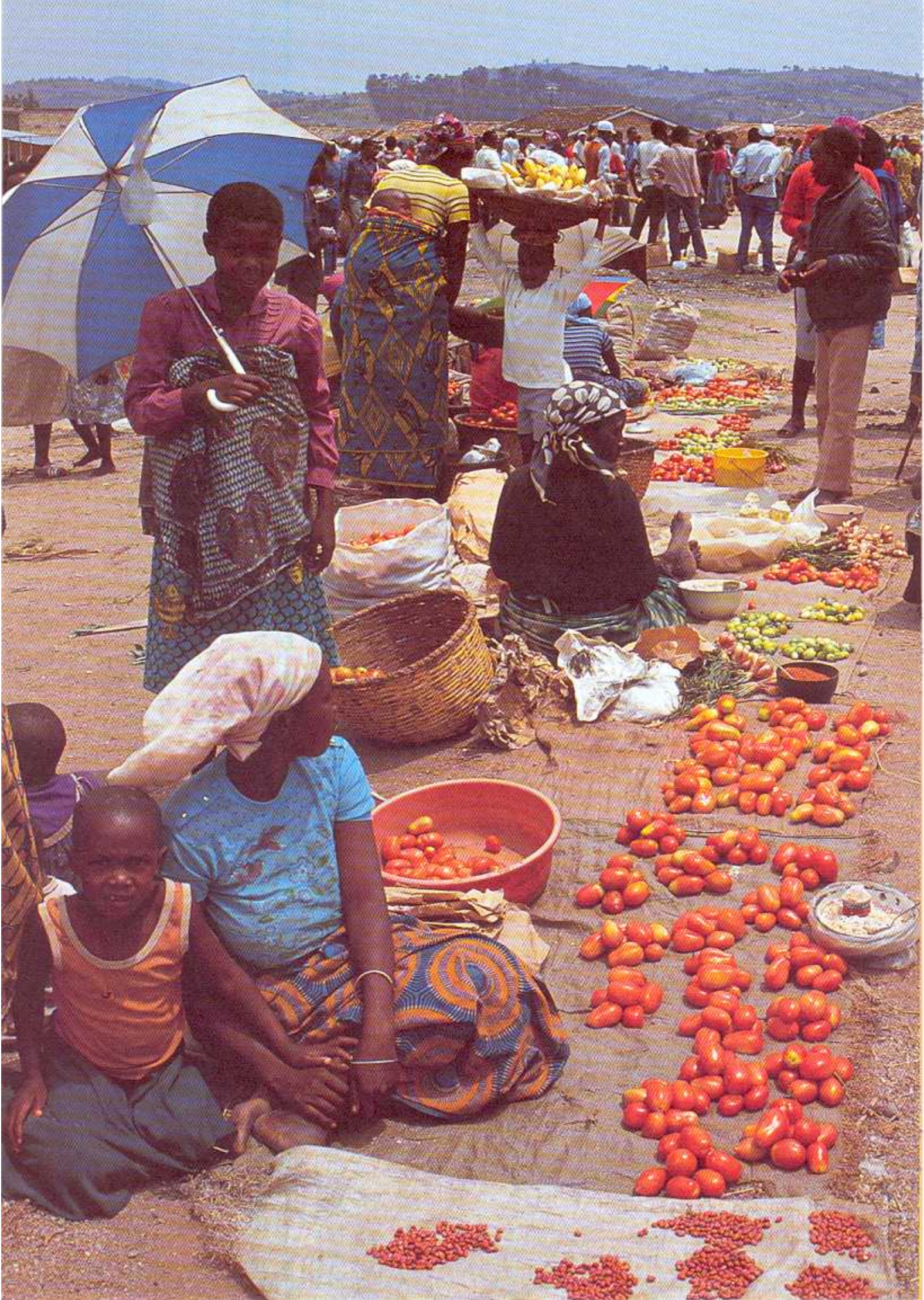
Daunting they often are, but compared with the problems that existed 50 years ago they are, on the one hand, of less draconian proportions and, on the other, more within our capacity to do something about.

When, for example, James Grant, former Executive Director of UNICEF, claimed that by the year 2000 we could, by inoculation, banish most childhood diseases the world over he was in fact, by both metaphor and illustration, underlining what remarkable resources contemporary mankind possesses. As for inoculation, so for many other problems and disabilities too. It is a question only of will and direction.

The UN has been at the heart of this sea-change in mankind’s condition. Sometimes the instigator, often the referee and, at the least, the sounding board where opinions are shared and comparisons sought.

This book looks at the most important and interesting aspects of the UN’s contribution. It is not, however, encyclopaedic. It offers a series of portraits into an organization at work, grappling with the unprecedented demands of contemporary history.

The UN is observed, a painting in process, where some strokes of the oil are still drying, others are uneven and unsure and, where the visage is clear, the furrowed brow as well as the more graceful features are obviously apparent.



A credible blueprint

The next 50 years? That, for many, is perhaps the most relevant question and for this year the challenge is to fashion a credible blueprint.

'We the peoples of the United Nations' - the opening words of the UN Charter, an ambition, 50 years later, unfulfilled. Who among us, we can all ask, feels they are part of the defining force of this green skyscraper in New York, much less the sprawling buildings of Geneva, Rome and Vienna? Even our governments appear to keep their distance. It is, as the Carlsson/Ramphal commission observes, 'a global third party - belonging to itself, owned by no one except its own officials'.¹

The single most necessary change that needs to be wrought is to change this perception, to involve governments and, not least, to involve their peoples. Only if this happens can the UN be effectively reformed so that it becomes the activist, muscular but lean, organization its founders envisaged.

Contrary to much received wisdom the present inadequacy of the UN is not all down to padded pay-rolls and turgid procedures although, in the opinion of some, all clearly play a part in slowing its activities down to what, too often, is a stately walk.

In many ways it is the legacy of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race. The Charter was negotiated in San Francisco, oblivious to the research on the atomic bomb being carried out a mere 1,000 miles away in New Mexico. The 'scourge of war' would not be removed, said the Charter, by a nuclear standoff, but by 'collective action in which armed force shall not be used save in the common interest'.

Indeed, the very first UN resolution, passed unanimously by the General Assembly, pledges nuclear states to total nuclear disarmament. And the United States suggested a series of measures to give effect to this, including bringing uranium mining, nuclear power generation and the nuclear bomb capacity of its own - the only one at that time - under inter-

national control. The proposal was rejected by Stalin and an incredible opportunity lost. Within five years of the founding of the UN the nuclear arms race was under way.

The Cold War fuelled the nuclear race and rendered the UN impotent in a wide range of activities, making peace-enforcement for the most part impossible and restricting peacekeeping to the rarest of occasions. The Security Council itself became, but for the odd exception, one more arena for East-West polemics.

Now that the Cold War is receding into history and the remaining nuclear arsenals of the two super-powers only point aimlessly to the sky, the UN is ripe for reinvigoration. Already much is in motion. The Security Council itself is almost in permanent session. Reform is openly discussed and new ideas are being aired. It is not today a question of when or if change will happen, but how.

*“reform is
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The genocide in Rwanda and wars in Africa, Central Asia and Europe have overshadowed the post-Cold War decline in the number of conflicts.

Rwandan refugees at a makeshift market.

The Security Council itself is now the subject of intense scrutiny. Can it continue to be dominated by the five veto-wielding powers, the 'victorious' of the Second World War? In 1945 no one envisaged the demise of the Soviet Union, the creation of the European Union, the rise to great power status of defeated Germany and Japan, the economic awakening of large parts of Asia and Latin America, the wealth of the oil states or the birth of over 100 new nations.

contributions have the biggest say in budgetary matters. This is not democracy as practised anywhere and it is unfair to those who give as much in proportion to their national income as the larger countries.³

The General Assembly needs to be streamlined and rationalized, reducing its agenda to more manageable proportions yet, at the same time, providing a

the General Assembly needs to be streamlined and rationalized

The 1945 *status quo*, as the Carlsson/Ramphal report says, with 'its unrepresentative character is the cause of disquiet leading to a crisis of legitimacy. Without reform it will not overcome that crisis. Without legitimacy in the eyes of the world's people it cannot be truly effective in its necessary role as a custodian of peace and security.'²

The General Assembly, the deliberative body in which every member nation has a seat, is the symbol of the UN as a universal and democratic organization. It has, however, always lived under the shadow of the Security Council and is, in many critics' eyes, nothing more than a frothy talking shop.

Yet its universality is its prime asset. It is why presidents and prime ministers regularly make their annual pilgrimage to address it and why it has been able to be the launch pad for important new ideas such as the Law of the Sea and the battle for human rights.

For the future it must develop a more coherent strategy for dealing with the budget of the organization, which is under its direct authority. This may mean resisting the traditional claim of the big donors that those who make the largest financial

forum for discussing the great controversies of the day that are the constant preoccupation of the Security Council. Only if the Assembly acts as a chamber constantly discussing the issues that confront the Security Council can it hope to influence it.

The Assembly, already more open than ever before to the growth of the now ubiquitous non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including those of the business community, needs to apply its mind to new ways of incorporating 'We the Peoples' into the deliberations of the main organs of the UN. Government participation alone is not sufficient if the Charter is to really come alive in our day and age.

In the future, once the Assembly itself is reshaped and revitalized, consideration should be given to the establishment of an ancillary debating body, a constituent assembly of parliamentarians along with an annual forum of civic non-governmental groups, where there is an opportunity to hear the voice of activists in the NGOs. This, together with a Right to Petition for action to redress wrongs, would go a long way to give substance to the long-neglected opening lines of the Charter.



Around 50 per cent of couples worldwide lack access to family planning.
A family planning clinic in Africa.



© Rob Cordina/Panos

Some take the view that on the economic and social front the UN probably needs a new organ of responsibility. One that can bring under a single umbrella the many faceted activities of the UN played out in numerous autonomous or semi-autonomous agencies and conferences. The present segregation of trade, competition policy, environment, macro-economic and social policies no longer work as well as were originally envisaged.

There is now a serious debate under way about creating an Economic Security Council. One suggestion which has been put forward, is that while it should contain a representative mix of countries, it should be small and businesslike. Like the Security Council itself, it should have high-level representation although it would probably not possess the authority to take legally binding decisions. However it would, by its brief, range and standards of work, gain some of the standing and influence in relation to international economic matters that the Security Council has in the political field.

The extension of the rule of international law is perhaps the least understood element of the UN, yet in the long run it could be the most important. One day, as more and more swords are beaten into ploughshares, international legal institutions will become as important as domestic ones are in resolving disputes and punishing crime. Nations in dispute will no longer resort to war but to the courts.

International law is an essential part of the Charter. The founding fathers of the UN instituted the International Court of Justice as the 'Cathedral of Law' in the global system. But military power and economic strength have worked to sideline it. It now needs to be brought back to centre stage, with the universal membership of the UN accepting its compulsory jurisdiction. The Security Council for its part could make greater use of the Court as a source of advisory opinions, thus avoiding the frequent need to have to adjudicate an international dispute itself.

The Court should also be widened to take on responsibility for individual criminal matters, or else perhaps there should be established a separate International Criminal Court. Finally, the present

ad hoc war crimes tribunal for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda should have its brief widened to allow it to consider war crimes cases in all areas of serious conflict.

The question of restructuring the UN Secretariat is one which has produced numerous, and often detailed, proposals now being discussed both within and outside the UN.

© Jon Delorme/Panos



In most developing countries, the lack of welfare often leaves the most vulnerable to fend for themselves. A 'despatch rider' in Santarem, Brazil.

To refashion the UN we need to look deep into ourselves and see what kind of world we really want. As Barbara Ward wrote back in 1971: 'The most important change that people can make is to change their way of looking at the world. We can change studies, jobs, neighbourhoods, even countries and continents, and still remain much as we always were. But change our fundamental angle of vision and everything changes – our priorities, our values, our judgements, our pursuits. Again and again, in the history of religion, this total upheaval in the imagination has marked the beginning of new life, a turning of the heart, a "metanoia", by which men see with new eyes and understand with new minds and turn their energies to new ways of living.'

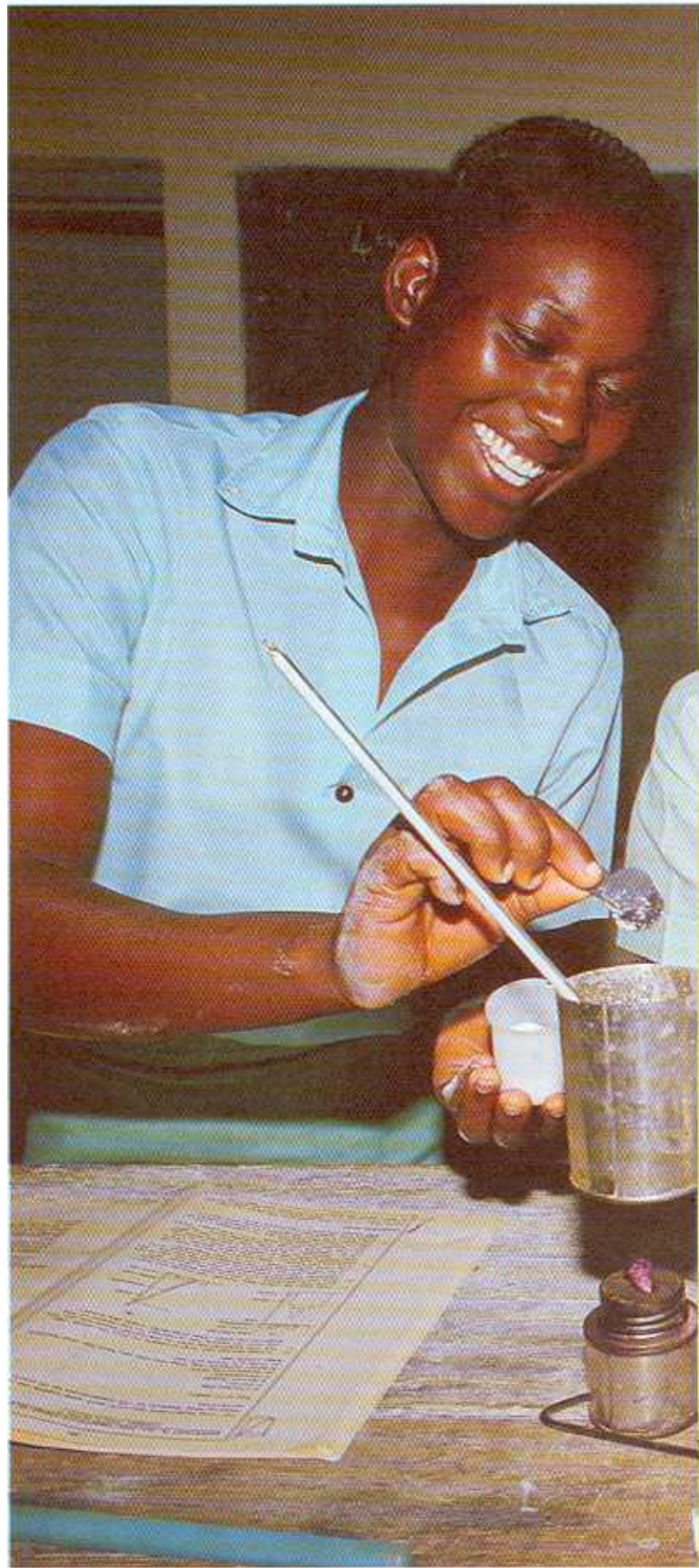
After 50 years, most of it consumed by the Cold War that froze so much of the life-spirit of the Charter, the UN is now slowly thawing. New seeds of endeavour, new shoots of opportunity can reach for air and light. We can make the world an even better place.

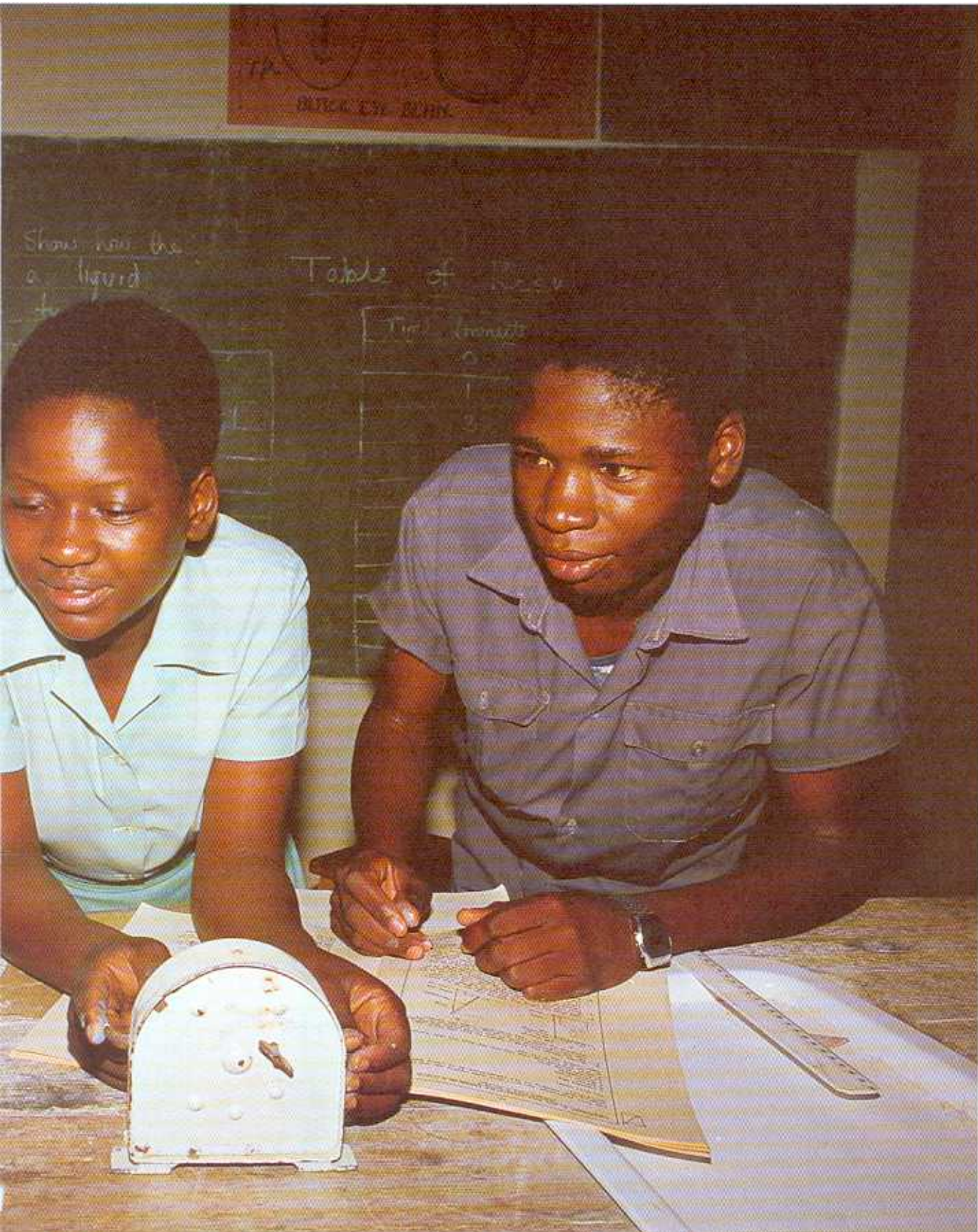
However, it will not happen without an immense application of political will. Any group of informed people can think of a hundred ways the UN can function better. But very few political leaders have the interest, the time, or the stature to really make an imprint on this immensely complicated vessel. The danger is that reform will only be tar slapped onto a weak hull, that most of the ship will be allowed to drift and that in the event of a big political gale it will take in water all too quickly.

What helmsman can drive his ship at speed in a condition like this? Secretaries-General can come and go but it is perhaps a near impossible command.

The present Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, has sought in all manner of ways to overhaul his boat but finance is restricted on the one side and resources, including personnel, in particular for peacekeeping, are withheld on the other.

The next two or three years are going to determine the course for the next 50. Will we use this time to give the UN the refitting it needs, knowing that in the Charter we have a remarkable blueprint that has stood the test of time and can probably take us through for another 50 years, given only a handful of amendments?





***Education is the key to lifting societies out of poverty.
A school in Zimbabwe.***

© Liba Taylor/Panos

The way the decision will go will depend much on public opinion – what do we the people want to see from the UN? This brings us back to the central paradox of the UN. It was created in the name of the peoples of the world, yet it functions day by day in a manner that gives the impression that it is owned by no one.

Some way has to be found to start an interactive relationship between peoples and the UN that will impress on governments the need to participate in a much enhanced form.

The 50th anniversary could be the beginning of that. More articles are going to be written, more books published, more television documentaries

made and more public meetings held on the subject of the UN, than in any other single year of its existence. Political leaders also have to play their part by using this opportunity to review their own policies towards the UN.

The essentials are already in place. If the last 50 years has not always been kind to the UN it has not been totally destructive either. The UN has developed in many positive and fruitful ways. Revolution is not needed. Reform is. Modest reform carried out purposefully and diligently could make the UN into what its founders wanted of it – an alternative to ‘the scourge of war’ that would ‘promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom’.

“in the Charter we have a remarkable blueprint that has stood the test of time”

Endnotes

1 *Our Global Neighbourhood* – Report of the Commission on Global Governance, chaired by Ingvar Carlsson and Shridath Ramphal. Oxford University Press, 1995.

2 *Ibid.*

3 The UN's total annual expenditure represents only \$1.90 per human being alive in 1992. This does not seem a lot when measured against government military expenditures of \$150 per person per year.