

# How Relevant Are the UN's Regional Commissions?

Stephen Browne and Thomas G. Weiss

Europe's recovery from World War II framed the agenda of the newly-formed United Nations in the 1940s and was institutionalized in its emergent institutions. The UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), the UN's first operational aid agency, was established to confront the ravages of the continent, and soon thereafter the UN High Commission for Refugees and the UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, later shortened to the UN Children's Fund). Then in 1947, responding to a Polish-inspired resolution in the General Assembly to organize and accelerate reconstruction, the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) was set up in Geneva.<sup>1</sup>

The following year, US secretary of state George Marshall launched his European reconstruction initiative, to be financed by the United States, and invited the Europeans to respond with their own disbursement plans. Instead of working through the ECE, however, the Europeans decided to set up the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) in Paris. The complex geo-political context, unfolding against the backdrop of East-West ideological rivalry, made the western powers more wary of invoking a universal body; and the marginalization of the ECE was a first major blow to the UN's regional reconstruction and development aspirations.

In the same year as the ECE's founding, the first session of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) was held in Shanghai, China, a country that had also been a major recipient of UNRRA assistance. There were only four independent Asian countries attending (China, India, Philippines, and Thailand), and six developed countries. The composition again anticipated a possible role for ECAFE—which later became the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)—as a funding channel for economic reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> This time aid did not materialize. There would be no Asian equivalent of the Marshall Plan.

Soon afterward, virtually all Latin American countries supported a regional commission for that area of the world as well. The

Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA, later ECLAC to encompass the Caribbean) duly came into being in 1949, but over the objections of many developed countries, which would have been responsible for funding any major development initiatives and thus asked for a full review of the workings of the commission after three years in order to debate its continuation.<sup>3</sup>

On the principle of not-three-without-five, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) was duly created in 1958 and the Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA) in 1974, completing the complement of UN regional organizations. But what was their purpose?

## THE SEARCH FOR A ROLE

The original objective of managing postwar reconstruction was quickly superseded and never revived. Did the commissions become regional centers of excellence? A qualified “yes” would characterize the initial period. The ECE's first executive secretary was the renowned Swedish economist (and later Nobel laureate) Gunnar Myrdal. He built a research team headed by the eminent Hungarian/British economist Nicholas Kaldor, which also included a number of other important economists such as Walt Rostow. ECLA also became something of an economic powerhouse with the appointment of Raúl Prebisch as its first executive secretary. He too attracted some weighty names from the region into the secretariat (including Celso Furtado and Osvaldo Sunkel). Prebisch and his team made a significant contribution to development analysis based on a paradigm of fundamental asymmetry between the developed countries (the global economic center) and the developing countries (the periphery).<sup>4</sup> These ideas became central to UN economic thinking in the 1950s and 1960s and could be said to have been the single most influential of UN development ideas, with the exception of the UN Development Programme's (UNDP) concept of human development in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup>

Of the five regional commissions, only ECLAC succeeded in sustaining a strong and consistent tradition of original economic

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analysis (contributing, for example, to the debates in the region on the debt crisis in the 1980s, for example). In 2005, the ECE stopped publishing its economic survey, following a readership survey and under pressure from the European Commission. The other commissions have maintained their research teams, but original analysis has been rare; and the annual surveys of their regions pass largely unnoticed.

Geographical ambiguity is another problem. While there is some uniformity in the structure and challenges of Latin American countries, including their strong inter-linkages with the US economy, and arguably in sub-Saharan Africa, it is difficult to define a highly heterogeneous “region” such as Asia/Pacific or West Asia. The UN has even had difficulty with Europe. In the 1990s, following the independence of the former Soviet republics, the ECE formally extended its jurisdiction to the central Asian countries and the Caucasus, following which ESCAP also claimed them.

Apart from undertaking development analysis, the regional commissions have also seen their role as the promotion of cooperation. They have encouraged and supported the creation of regional institutions in different domains. But with the notable exception of regional development banks, some of which were first mooted in the commissions, the sustainability of such institutions has always been problematic. For example, four regional institutions set up under ESCAP auspices in the late 1970s were all subsequently closed down. Those that remain are usually kept going mainly with the support of host-country governments.

There have been other examples of intra-regional cooperation, but they are somewhat random and could have been developed under the auspices of other UN organizations, which have more abundant and more appropriate expertise. To cite just two examples, the ECE developed a convention on the transport of dangerous goods, which became global in scope (also a responsibility of the UN Environment Programme). ESCAP’s original work on population dynamics was superseded when the UN Population Fund was created.

In practice, and given such definitional problems, the most fertile opportunities for cooperation have been among clusters of contiguous countries and sub-regions. Recognizing the potential for sub-regional cooperation, some of the regional commissions established their own sub-offices: ESCAP in the Pacific, ECLAC in Mexico and the Caribbean, and the ECA in several capitals around the continent. These offices helped to promote sub-regional dialogue, but there have been very few examples of regional commissions actually inspiring the creation of sub-regional intergovernmental bodies. In Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation were set up independently of ESCAP. One possible exception would have been the Mekong Committee of four riverine states in Southeast Asia, which was UN-inspired but not an ESCAP creation. During its early years, it reported to the ESCAP annual meeting, but it was mainly supported by the UNDP and is now wholly independent of the United Nations. In Africa where the main regional intergovernmental body is the (non-UN) African Union, no sub-regional organization (the Common Market for Eastern and

Southern Africa, the Economic Community of West African States, the Economic Community for Central African States, the East African Community, and the South African Development Community) owes its existence to the ECA.

Aside from institution-building, the regional commissions could also have played a part in helping to conceive and mobilize the financing for regional infrastructure, such as roads and railways. But no such major projects materialized. In Asia, ESCAP envisioned an Asian highway and Asian railway from its earliest days, and it has pursued the idea unsuccessfully for decades.

The harsh reality for the regional commissions has been that without significant amounts of resources for regional reconstruction, institution-building, or the creation of infrastructure, their achievements in terms of fostering regional cooperation have been minimal. Much of their activity consists of convening meetings—usually of government officials and experts from their region—which generally result in declarations and agreements of limited practical significance. For various reasons, even the role of the commissions in mobilizing and giving voice to regional opinions has been marginal.<sup>6</sup> For one thing, the formulation of strictly regional policy positions is inhibited by the fact some developed countries (mostly ex-colonial powers) are also members of the regional commissions. For another, the UN’s major development debates are global in scope and regional positions usually become subsumed in common global positions taken by the G77. The negotiation of the outcome declaration of Rio+20 is just one recent example.

## RESOURCES

Notwithstanding the ambiguity of their role, the regional commissions have been financially secure. Their core secretariats have been maintained throughout their existence by support from the UN’s biennial regular budget, from which they receive automatic shares that are unrelated to any notion of performance. To supplement these core resources, the commissions solicit additional “extra-budgetary” funding from donor governments. These funds are used mainly to support small-scale technical assistance (TA) projects; and because donors earmark them for particular purposes and destinations, they resemble bilateral aid. The earmarking of funds has become a dominant feature not just of the regional commissions but of the UN development system as a whole. The commissions often duplicate the TA of other UN organizations, which have much larger and more specialized staff, as well as their own regional and country presence. The commissions have therefore become, for TA purposes, microcosms of the larger UN development system with no special advantages.

## ARE THE COMMISSIONS RELEVANT?

In the commercial world, companies refer to “unique selling points” to justify their existence. In the case of the UN regional commissions, there is nothing comparable. If they disappeared, it is difficult to imagine which if any of their activities could not be assumed by the myriad regional and sub-regional structures of the other two-dozen UN development organizations, or the well-resourced regional development banks.

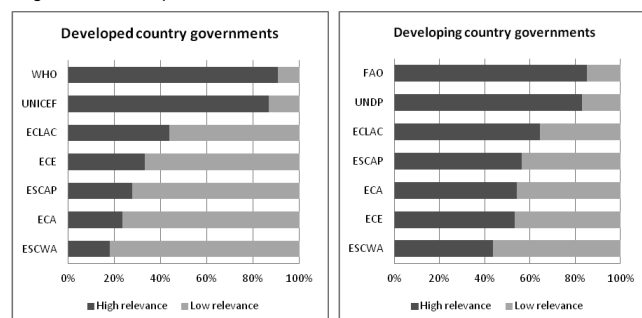
In 1995, the Commission on Global Governance published its report, *Our Global Neighbourhood*.<sup>7</sup> The eminent group comprised of leaders from both the North and South recommended that “the continuing utility of the regional commissions now needs to be closely examined.” Recognizing the proliferation of regional and sub-regional organizations, the commission proposed that the objective of regionalism “could be helped if resources now spent on the regional commissions were diverted to support these organizations and their activities.”

A decade later, the regional commissions were again in a negative spotlight. The UN secretary-general created the High-level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence to propose a set of reforms for the development system.<sup>8</sup> The panel was chaired by three serving prime ministers, one of whom (from a developing country) wanted to abolish the regional commissions. The proposal did not find its way into the final report, however.

Further concerns about the relevance of the commissions were highlighted by two recent global perception surveys undertaken by the FUNDS project of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies. The surveys, in 2010 and 2012, canvassed by means of a questionnaire a total of over 6,500 people from all regions and across all major occupational groups.<sup>9</sup> The respondents were asked to rate the relevance of all the UN’s main development organizations, and the results quite clearly placed the regional commissions on the bottom of the ratings. The accompanying graphs plot the percentages of respondents claiming to be knowledgeable about each organization, who considered it to be relevant. In each case the five regional commissions are compared with the two organizations considered to be the most relevant. The results are stark.

Of the respondents from governments of developed countries, more than 80 percent rate the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF as relevant, but fewer than half rated the regional commissions that way. ESCWA is considered relevant by fewer than 20 percent. The commissions fare better with developing country governments, but only ECLAC is given a favorable rating higher than 60 percent.

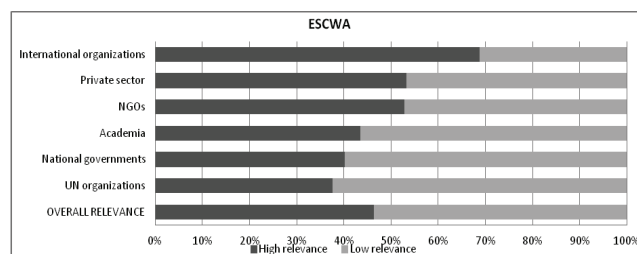
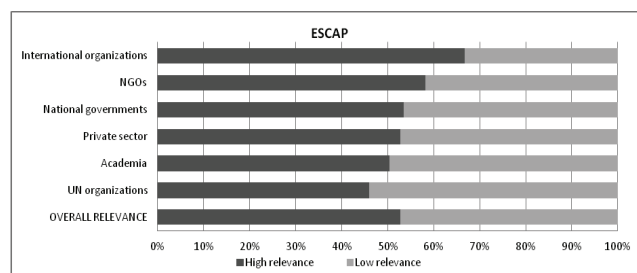
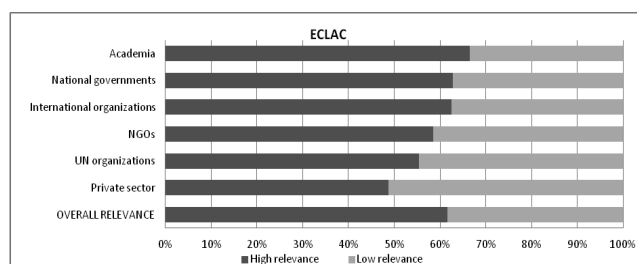
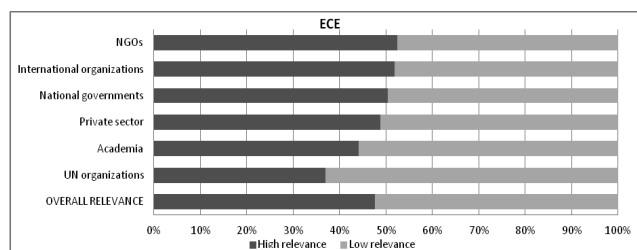
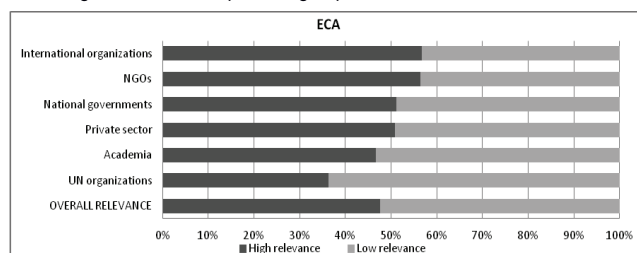
Relevance of UN development organizations, according to government respondents



When the relevance ratings are broken down by each commission by occupational categories, those from other (non-UN) international public organizations have a generally more favorable opinion than

other categories. Very low relevance ratings are recorded by staff in other UN organizations.

Relevance of UN development organizations, according to different occupational groups



## WHITHER THE REGIONAL COMMISSIONS?

The views about the relevance of the regional commissions—at least as expressed by those in the survey who claim knowledge about them—signify that their role is far from evident. Other non-UN organizations have faced such crises in the past, and those that survived have adapted to new roles. Once the task of guiding European reconstruction was complete, member states of the

OEEC, for example, gradually transformed it into a club of developed countries—the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development—producing high-quality research and generating information on North-South financial flows, among other functions. Another postwar creation, but of World War I, was the Bank for International Settlements, which continued as an organization for central banks after World War II when war reparations were no longer relevant. The first two regional commissions, however, were established for a purpose that never materialized. They continued through inertia, and new ones were created with no clear purpose beyond an ill-defined assumption that the UN needed regional arms.

Does it matter that there is widespread concern about the relevance of the UN's regional commissions? They would all surely claim to be doing useful work, even if it is little more than frequent exchanges of experience and the signing of agreements. The commissions

duplicate, but do not detract from, the activities of the rest of the UN development system, almost all of which have their own regional structures. They do not raise controversial issues; they are invariably uncritical of member governments.

Like all UN organizations, regional commissions are considered too-friendly-to-fail, and in the absence of any objective performance criteria by which to assess individual organizations, no UN organization has ever been closed (only occasionally merged). Together the regional commissions cost global tax-payers US\$ 400 million per year and employ some 2,500 individuals. However, these numbers are trivial by the standards of international organizations.

So the regional commissions could continue indefinitely. The only real cost is to the UN's declining reputation as a serious development interlocutor.

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## NOTES

1. Yves Berthelot and Paul Rayment, "The ECE: A Bridge between East and West," in *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas: Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions*, ed. Yves Berthelot (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 56.
2. Leelananda de Silva, "From ECAFE to ESCAP: Pioneering a Regional Perspective," in *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas*, ed. Berthelot, 140-1.
3. Gert Rosenthal, "ECLAC: A Commitment to a Latin American Way Toward Development," in *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas*, ed. Berthelot, 172.
4. There has also been some dispute about the relative roles of Prebisch and Hans Singer. See John Toye and Richard Toye, *The UN and Global Political Economy: Trade, Finance and Development* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 110-124.
5. Craig N. Murphy, *The United Nations Development Programme: A Better Way?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 240-250; and Stephen Browne, *The United Nations Development Programme and System* (London: Routledge, 2011), 48-52.
6. A January 2011 article in the *International Herald Tribune*, "A Bloated UN Bureaucracy Causes Bewilderment," questioned why the ECE had drawn up food standards for llama and alpaca meat.
7. The Commission on Global Governance, *Our Global Neighbourhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
8. High-level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence, *Delivering as One* (New York: United Nations, 2007).
9. See <http://www.FutureUN.org>



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