

Managing the world: the United Nations, decolonization, and the strange triumph of state sovereignty in the 1950s and 1960s*

Eva-Maria Muschik

Freie Universität Berlin, Center for Global History, Koserstr. 20, 14195 Berlin, Germany
E-mail: eva-maria.muschik@fu-berlin.de

Abstract

This article examines a 1956 United Nations effort to respond to decolonization, by supplying newly independent governments with international administrators to help build sovereign nation-states out of the disintegrating European empires and anchor them firmly within the capitalist world. The article reveals the UN as a significant historical actor during the Cold War beyond the organization's function of providing a forum for intergovernmental debates and lobbying. While the initiative never resulted in a large-scale response to decolonization, it ultimately effected a substantial shift in the practice of development assistance: from advisory services to a more paternalist approach that focused on 'getting the work done' on behalf of aid recipients. Recovering this history helps account for the strange triumph of state sovereignty in the second half of the twentieth century: its global proliferation at a time when international actors became increasingly active in the management of the public affairs of developing countries.

Keywords decolonization, development, global cold war, public administration, United Nations Secretariat

In a 1956 speech, the United Nations Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, shared his thoughts about two of the major revolutionary developments of the time: on the one hand, the attempt to realize the principle of self-determination and, on the other hand, the quest to improve the economic and social conditions of life for the vast majority of humanity. Realizing

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those twin aspirations, he declared, was one of the greatest problems facing the post-war world, and he suggested that efforts to tackle these issues on an international scale had fallen far short of the ideal.¹ This article examines Hammarskjöld's 1950s initiative to establish a special kind of UN assistance, an 'international administrative service', which was meant to serve the particular needs of nations emerging from colonial rule and enable them to achieve both self-determination and development. It sheds light on the role of international organizations in the process of decolonization and shows how the dissolution of the European empires in the post-war period affected the practice of international development assistance and the nature of state sovereignty.

In the 1950s, a rising number of states won independence from imperial rule at much greater speed than many observers at the time had anticipated. Upon independence, new governments were caught between the commitment to nationalize state bureaucracies mostly still dominated by former colonial administrators and the urge to use state capacities to deliver on the manifold promises of development made in the run-up to independence.² To assist governments in meeting this challenge, the UN Secretary-General proposed creating a UN career service composed of seasoned, high-level administrators who would temporarily help run their state bureaucracies. Hammarskjöld argued that the feeble new polities needed a bit of 'elbow room' to escape dependence, past and future, formal or informal, and establish their sovereignty on secure foundations.³ In his view, only the dispatch of disinterested experienced administrators under international auspices, who could make the best use of both outside assistance and existing resources within a country, could guarantee such independence: 'Fundamentally, man is the key to our problems, not money.'⁴ In the long run, he was confident that national training programmes would meet the personnel needs of the new nations. But he warned that 'the long run may be very long and the need is urgent'.⁵ The UN could serve as a kind of stopgap organization, a bridge from imperial pasts to an international future.

Hammarskjöld's proposal was based on two assumptions: first, the idea that economic development relied fundamentally on capable national governance; and second, the conception that government administration was a skill or science separate from politics and thus one that allowed for outside intervention without constituting an infringement of national sovereignty. Administrators merely carried out decisions, while elected officials made political choices. Hammarskjöld's initiative appeared to simplify the complex political process of government to a technocratic question of management. The Secretary-General presented UN administrative assistance as essentially disinterested and representative of a universal consensus reached by countries across political divides. A closer look at how his proposal was negotiated and reshaped by UN member states, however, reveals that the communist countries were by and large ignored and that Hammarskjöld and his staff indeed hoped that ostensibly value-neutral UN administrative assistance would lead to capitalist development.

1 United Nations, press release SG/482: 'Address by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld to International Law Association at McGill University, Montréal, Wednesday, 30 May 1956', 29 May 1956.

2 Sarah Stockwell, 'Exporting Britishness: decolonization in Africa, the British state and its clients', in Miguel Bändera Jerónimo and António Costa Pinto, eds., *The ends of European colonial empires: cases and comparisons*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 148–77.

3 Brian Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld*, New York: Knopf, 1972, p. 387.

4 'Address by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld'.

5 *Ibid.*

The international administrative service never came into being quite as Hammarskjöld had envisioned it, and the UN did not play the role in decolonization that its employees had hoped it would. While many newly independent countries, such as Sudan, enthusiastically supported the UN Secretary-General's initiative, a rather odd alliance of countries acting with different motives, including third world nations, imperial powers, and the Eastern European countries, ensured that Hammarskjöld's original vision was reshaped considerably. The initiative, however, was far from inconsequential. It enforced the idea of the independent state as responsible for national wellbeing and development, as the 'normal' member of the international community and as the logical outcome of European decolonization. Yet UN officials also suggested that state sovereignty was tied to administrative capacity and that lack thereof called for outside intervention.

The eventual outcome of Hammarskjöld's proposal, the UN Programme for Operational and Executive Personnel (OPEX) provided specialists in such fields as meteorology or broadcasting to executive posts in developing countries. It was soon copied by other aid agencies and ultimately absorbed into the regular UN assistance services with the creation of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in 1965. This evolution pushed international development assistance more generally from advisory services into an increasingly interventionist, operational role. Recovering this history helps account for the strange triumph of nation-states as a result of decolonization: their global proliferation at a time when state sovereignty increasingly became a less meaningful barrier to outside intervention in the management of public affairs of developing countries.⁶

Many scholars have noted that decolonization dramatically changed the composition and work of international bodies such as the UN.⁷ In contrast, the impact of international organizations on how decolonization itself unfolded has received far less attention.⁸ Existing studies of the topic tend to examine the intergovernmental forums of international bodies as sites of debates and lobbying.⁹ Scholarship focused on the Cold War similarly tends to portray the world organization as 'frozen into impotency' by the East–West stalemate, reduced to a mere propaganda platform or talking shop.¹⁰ Rather than using international organizations merely as 'observation posts', this article approaches the world organization as a historical

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- 6 Greg Mann asks a similar question in his most recent book: how and why did NGOs begin to assume functions of sovereignty at a time when it was so highly valued? Gregory Mann, *From empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: the road to nongovernmentality*, African Studies Series 129, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015; Mark Mazower uses the phrase 'strange triumph' to describe a strengthening of the principle of state sovereignty with the new human rights regime underwritten by the UN in 1945. Mark Mazower, 'The strange triumph of human rights, 1933–1950', *Historical Journal*, 47, 2, 2004, pp. 379–98.
 - 7 Evan Luard, *A history of the United Nations: the age of decolonization, 1955–1965*, 2 vols., New York: St Martin's Press, 1982; Paul M. Kennedy, *The parliament of man: the past, present, and future of the United Nations*, New York: Random House, 2006; Mark Mazower, *Governing the world: the history of an idea*, New York: Penguin Press, 2012.
 - 8 Notable exceptions are David Webster, 'Development advisors in a time of cold war and decolonization: the United Nations Technical Assistance Administration, 1950–59', *Journal of Global History*, 6, 2, 2011, pp. 249–72; Daniel Maul, *Human rights, development and decolonization: the International Labour Organization, 1940–70*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
 - 9 Matthew James Connelly, *A diplomatic revolution: Algeria's fight for independence and the origins of the post-Cold War era*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Meredith Terretta, "'We had been fooled into thinking that the UN watches over the entire world": human rights, UN trust territories, and Africa's decolonization', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 34, 2, 2012, pp. 329–60; Tracey Banivanua-Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific: indigenous globalisation and the ends of empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
 - 10 David Clark MacKenzie, *A world beyond borders: an introduction to the history of international organisations*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, p. 57.

actor in its own right, exploring how UN officials actively sought to shape decolonization and anchor the new states firmly within the capitalist world.¹¹

Recent scholarship has focused on how colonial powers sought to protect the interests of empire by means of international organization.¹² By contrast, the story of Hammarskjöld's international administrative service shows how UN officials actively supported the dismantling of formal empires and put the organization into direct competition with colonial powers' attempts to manage decolonization and thereby maintain strong informal ties with their colonies. It also sheds light on how the officially apolitical international civil servants in New York City conceived of the role of the world organization in the Cold War battle for the development of the so-called Third World. By providing new nations with a bit of 'elbow room', UN officials hoped that they would 'naturally' become more like 'the West'.

Following James Ferguson's landmark study of development as an anti-politics machine, scholars have repeatedly shown how development work depoliticized contentious issues by presenting them as technical problems.¹³ Ferguson's second claim, which has received somewhat less attention, is that the expansion of bureaucratic state power was a 'side effect' of development. The story of Hammarskjöld's initiative suggests that UN officials quite consciously put heavy emphasis on strengthening administrative structures as a prime objective of development precisely *because* state sovereignty inhibited them from officially entering national politics. Intervening in national administrations or bureaucracies, so they thought, was as close as one could get to effecting internal changes in a country, while still respecting national self-determination.

Under Hammarskjöld's watch, UN civil servants offered international development assistance as a state-building tool to newly independent governments. Development assistance enabled the UN to reconcile its position as both 'arbiter of the universal and defender of the particularism of the nation-state'.¹⁴ It provided a means to support the nation-state form and thus widen the base of UN clientele while claiming for the world organization a privileged position to influence national policies. In this context, development cannot be understood as a neo-colonial imposition or a triumph of international understanding as previous scholarship has argued.¹⁵ Rather, development appears as a negotiated process between states of vastly different bargaining positions, which is mediated and shaped by international civil servants.¹⁶

11 For a similar approach, see Webster, 'Development advisors'. For international organizations as 'observation posts', see Sandrine Kott, 'International organizations: a field of research for a global history', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, 8, 2011, pp. 446–50. On international organizations as actors in international relations, see e.g. Martha Finnemore, *National interests in international society*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.

12 Mark Mazower, *No enchanted palace: the end of empire and the ideological origins of the United Nations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009; Susan Pedersen, *The guardians: the League of Nations and the crisis of empire*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

13 James Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine: 'development', depoliticization, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

14 Sunil Amrith and Glenda Sluga, 'New histories of the United Nations', *Journal of World History*, 19, 3, 2008, pp. 251–74.

15 For the neocolonialist argument, see e.g. Antony Anghie, *Colonialism, sovereignty, and the making of international law*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. For the triumphalist interpretation, see e.g. Craig Murphy, *The United Nations Development Programme: a better way?*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

16 A number of historical studies have pointed to the negotiated nature of development; one of the earliest examples is Monica M. Van Beusekom, *Negotiating development: African farmers and colonial experts at the Office du Niger, 1920–1960*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002.

In this process the tension between international trusteeship in the name of expertise and national self-determination in the name of state sovereignty was continuously renegotiated.

There was no rule of experts, much as there was no world government.¹⁷ The UN, as Daniel Speich has argued, established norms of government but did not rule. It functioned neither as a globalized nation-state nor as an empire ruled from New York. Instead, global governance as practised by UN experts and bureaucrats drew legitimacy and gained adherence through the communication of scientific rationality.¹⁸ Where the UN failed to convince member governments of the soundness or utility of its advice or operations, there was little the organization could do to determine policy-making, either national or international. Yet the UN initiative for an international administrative service had the important effect of prompting member states to redefine how government would be practised in the postcolonial world.

Hammar skjöld, UN development assistance, and public administration

When recommending the Swedish public servant Dag Hammar skjöld as the new Secretary-General in 1952, the UN Security Council had hoped for a 'careful and colourless official' who would concentrate mainly on the organization's own administrative problems.¹⁹ Yet the son of a rather unpopular Swedish prime minister soon assumed the role of the 'world's troubleshooter' and that of an outspoken advocate for the economic development of poorer countries.²⁰ Although Hammar skjöld had dabbled in philosophy and French literature as a student, his background was firmly rooted in economics.²¹ He had briefly studied with John Maynard Keynes and was associated with the Stockholm School, a group of economists known for 'proposing Keynesian policies before Keynes'.²² Anne Orford argues that Hammar skjöld's economic thinking, however, was more closely aligned with Germany's so-called 'Ordoliberal School', which favoured administrative neutrality over state planning and 'expert rule over democratic interest-based politics', a theme reflected in his proposal for an international administrative service.²³

According to his biographer, the Secretary-General had a deep sense of the inequality of nations, in terms of both opportunity and actual position. Yet Hammar skjöld was generally hopeful that the establishment of international organizations signified a profound revolution in international thinking: that the existence of a world community for which all nations shared a common responsibility was now generally accepted. He believed that this responsibility entailed the duty to reduce the disparity in levels of living standards *between* nations, much as

17 For arguments about the rule, triumph, or tyranny of experts, see Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002; Joseph Hodge, *Triumph of the expert: agrarian doctrines of development and the legacies of British colonialism*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007; William Easterly, *The tyranny of experts: economists, dictators, and the forgotten rights of the poor*, New York: Basic Books, 2013.

18 Daniel Speich Chassé, 'Decolonization and global governance: approaches to the history of the UN-system', lecture for the History of International Organizations Network, Geneva, 2013.

19 Urquhart, *Hammar skjöld*, p. 15.

20 Kennedy, *Parliament of man*, p. 61.

21 Urquhart, *Hammar skjöld*, pp. 22, 369.

22 Anne Orford, 'Hammar skjöld, economic thinking and the United Nations', in Carsten Stahn and Henning Melber, eds., *Peace diplomacy, global justice and international agency: rethinking human security and ethics in the spirit of Dag Hammar skjöld*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 157.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

the need for greater economic and social equality *within* nations had earlier been accepted. The Secretary-General was determined that the UN, as the most democratic and broadly based international organization of the post-war landscape, should play a major role in the economic development of the less prosperous regions of the world. Echoing the basic assumptions of the UN Charter, which linked world security to global welfare, he saw economic development as crucial to the foundation of a more stable political order in the world.²⁴

Hammar skjöld's approach to how the goal of an international balance might be attained through the UN was a pragmatic one. He noted that much more could be achieved if the goodwill that had led to the establishment of post-war international aid programmes were applied to improving trade relations for developing countries (for example, through stabilizing world commodity prices).²⁵ Yet the Secretary-General did not put his weight behind any UN initiative in that direction. Rather, he sought to work with, improve, and expand the existing UN machinery for economic development. He was keenly aware that the resources of the UN were 'pathetically small' in relation to the vast and complex problems of world poverty. Nevertheless, he had 'high hopes of the potentialities' of UN assistance and was determined that it should grow into an important vehicle for economic development.²⁶

When Hammar skjöld took office, so-called 'technical assistance' – the transfer of knowledge and skills conveyed by advisory experts to requesting governments – functioned as the UN's primary means for delivering on the promise of global development. Initially, UN member states' requests for development assistance from the organization were based on a General Assembly resolution passed in December 1948 on the initiative of Burma, Chile, Egypt, and Peru.²⁷ Such assistance was meant to help countries help themselves: the sovereignty of recipient governments had been the primary concern in negotiating the resolution. To prevent outside interference in domestic affairs, recipient governments were to be in full control of the kind of assistance provided.²⁸

Requests for assistance were addressed to the UN Secretariat, the New York bureaucracy composed of international civil servants that carried out the day-to-day work of the world organization. The Secretariat's Department of Economic and Social Affairs then arranged the short-term dispatch of teams of experts or of individual specialists to conduct surveys and provide advice to governments. For the recruitment of experts, the Secretariat relied on the so-called UN specialized agencies, autonomous international organizations within the broader UN system, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), or the International Labour Organization (ILO). To finance such 'technical assistance for economic development', the General Assembly had allocated the modest sum of US\$288,000 from the regular UN budget, which was financed through fixed annual membership contributions.

A month after the General Assembly passed the resolution on technical assistance for economic development, the US President Harry Truman famously called for a 'bold new

24 Urquhart, *Hammar skjöld*, pp. 370–1, 375.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 374.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 370, 376.

27 UN General Assembly (henceforth UNGA) Resolution A/RES/200(III), 'Technical assistance for economic development', 4 December 1948.

28 Olav Stokke, *The UN and development: from aid to cooperation*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009, p. 48.

program ... for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas' during his inaugural address.²⁹ While Truman's so-called Point Four speech is often credited with ushering in the 'great American mission' of global modernization in the post-war period, it is mostly forgotten that he called on 'all nations to work together through the United Nations and its specialized agencies' for this purpose.³⁰ Although critics charged that Truman's foray was neither bold nor new, nor even necessarily a programme, his speech certainly caused great excitement among UN officials. Even though the US would go on to concentrate on bilateral rather than multi-lateral aid, subsequent US financial support for UN technical assistance activities, pooled with other voluntary contributions from UN member states in a separate fund of US\$20 million, propelled the organization's fledgling activities in that area to another level.³¹

While the US initiative effected a quantum leap in terms of funding, it did not alter the nature of UN technical assistance activities. Assistance was meant to come in the form of advice or training, a transfer of knowledge that could be taken or rejected by recipient governments. In practice, however, many UN development experts engaged in work that went beyond purely advisory tasks, calling it 'operational' or 'executive' assistance. A prospector looking for mineral wealth, for example, was not in the strict sense of the word offering his advice. Moreover, both governments and experts grew increasingly disenchanted with the limitations of advice. A 1957 study of technical assistance conducted by a former US aid official stated:

most of the underdeveloped countries feel that they have been 'surveyed to death'. And it is quite true that a number of them have seen successive survey missions, public and private, ... arrive, make a survey, publish a report, and depart to be unheard of again. It has become a popular pastime to make fun of these 'useless surveys' in government corridors.³²

The study suggested that survey missions' reports tended to be both lengthy and general, creating a daunting read that recipient governments by and large neglected. Yet length and scope were not the sole reasons that such reports had so little effect: translating a broad survey's information into actual policy required a high degree of administrative competence, and the author of the study argued that government personnel of the right calibre were scarce in developing countries.³³ Hammarskjöld's initiative for an international administrative service effectively catered to such concerns about the limited usefulness of surveys and advice.

The idea of linking public administration to development and even the proposal to invest international experts with administrative power in national civil services was not entirely new. In return for reconstruction loans, the League of Nations had dispatched resident 'Commissioners' to Austria, Bulgaria, Danzig, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, and the Saar Territory to

29 For Truman's speech on 20 January 1949, see e.g. https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/50yr_archive/inagural20jan1949.htm (consulted 17 February 2017).

30 David Ekbladh, *The great American mission: modernization and the construction of an American world order*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

31 Stokke, *UN and development*, p. 22.

32 Philip M. Glick, *The administration of technical assistance*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957, pp. 60–1. As early as 1943, an ILO report similarly noted that a joint Bolivian–American Labor Commission had raised expectations that the US might offer support to Bolivia that would go beyond an inspection and a report, since everybody already knew that conditions were deplorable. International Labour Organization Archives, Joint-Bolivian-American Labor Commission 1943, File no. Z 3/8/1, Dossier Connexes, Req. file MI 1/8, Magruder to Hull, 22 March 1943.

33 Glick, *Administration*, p. 61.

influence governments' budgetary, fiscal, and administrative policies. Moreover, in the early 1930s the League was heavily involved in reorganizing China's public health services and economic reconstruction efforts.³⁴

In 1948, Brazil took the matter to UN General Assembly, arguing that 'spreading knowledge of *the art of science* of administration, [seemed] logically to be the first step in any effort for development'.³⁵ In recent years, the Brazilian delegate noted, the function of government had extended more and more into the social and economic fields. Therefore, the complexity of government duties had increased considerably. Without proper administration, however, neither the formulation nor the execution of development plans could be successful. Anticipating Hammarskjöld's later statements, the Brazilian representative argued that the 'promotion of economic and social progress depended on the human factor even more than on material resources'.³⁶ Yet, whereas Hammarskjöld proposed the dispatch of foreign administrators to developing countries under UN auspices, Brazil asked for the establishment of an international training and research centre for public administration.

Brazil's proposal, which had been inspired by recommendations made by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America, was supported by a number of Latin American countries, as well as India, Pakistan, and Haiti. Yet it met with strong criticism in the General Assembly. Brazil's opponents argued that administration was an aspect of politics, rather than a scientific system or a technical skill. There was no general method of public administration; each state had to develop its own approach. UN interference in administration, even if only through training, would constitute a direct intervention in the national affairs of its member states and thus a breach of their sovereignty.

The communist countries were particularly vociferous defenders of the principle of non-interference in domestic politics. Other countries, such as Canada, insisted that the UN was essentially a coordinating rather than an operative agency: its mission was not 'to distribute celestial manna in the guise of large funds or technical assistance', as the Belgian representative put it, but to solve problems between states by means of agreement.³⁷ Still others such as China questioned the UN's competence, cautioning that 'enthusiasm should not get the better of common sense': the UN had neither the resources, nor the experience, nor even a philosophy of public administration.³⁸ The Polish delegate likewise expressed doubt about UN capacities, suggesting, in a surprising bow to the West, that the organization could not hope to match established Soviet, French, British, and US public administration research and training facilities.³⁹

34 Margherita Zanasi, 'Exporting development: the League of Nations and republican China', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 49, 1, 2007, pp. 143–69; Patricia Clavin, *Securing the world economy: the reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 26 ff; Nathan Marcus, 'Credibility, confidence and capital: Austrian reconstruction and the collapse of global finance, 1921–1931', PhD thesis, New York University, 2010.

35 Faqir Muhammad, 'United Nations technical assistance in public administration with special reference to the provision of operational and executive personnel', PhD thesis, Syracuse University, 1960, pp. 107–8, my emphasis.

36 *Ibid.*

37 UNGA, A/C.5/SR.165, Fifth Committee, Summary record of the 165th meeting, 'Continuation of the consideration of international facilities for the promotion of training in public administration', 23 November 1948, p. 742.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 740.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 729.

The Venezuelan delegate countered that following a single national school of public administration was undesirable and that the merit of an international centre was to achieve a synthesis of different approaches. Haiti agreed, arguing that the UN could not become an 'international family' unless differences between its members were significantly reduced.⁴⁰ Brazil finally expressed the hope that the organization would not 'degenerate into a mere debating society'.⁴¹ As a result of the pushback, the Brazilian proposal for an international training centre was rejected. Nevertheless, by a rather close vote governments decided that international technical assistance activities in the realm of administration (such as seminars, scholarships, and the dispatch of advisory experts to requesting governments) would be permitted. While not an outright success, Brazil's initiative in 1948 effectively resulted in the international recognition of public administration as a kind of technical knowledge, and established the competence of the UN to render assistance in this field. International acceptance coincided with the recognition of public administration as an independent science and as a discipline in Europe and North America in the immediate post-war period.

Under the chairmanship of Hubertus van Mook, who had served as Acting Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies until 1948, shortly before Indonesia gained independence, the Secretariat convened a committee of experts to establish some guidelines, which would be published by the UN as *Standards and techniques of public administration with special reference to technical assistance for under-developed countries* in 1951. That same year, a Public Administration Division was established within the Secretariat under van Mook's leadership. Simply by virtue of continuities in personnel, there was thus a direct link between the late European colonial project and early UN efforts to render administrative assistance to 'underdeveloped' countries.⁴²

The new Secretariat division was to provide advice to governments regarding administrative reform and training centres, collect and exchange information on public administration, and analyse the problems of developing countries in the field. In the following years, the UN helped to set up several national and regional training centres and institutes of public administration, for example in Brazil, Turkey, Egypt, and Costa Rica.⁴³ Public administration thus became one of seven categories of technical assistance activity for which the UN Secretariat assumed primary responsibility. The others included economic development, industrial development, transport and communications, public finance and fiscal questions, and social development.

UN publications on public administration promoted the idea that poorly structured institutions constituted a prime obstacle to economic progress. Their writers argued that the process of modernization in developing countries required thoroughgoing administrative reform – a transition from semi-feudal or traditional arrangements to rational and efficient forms of government organization. Public administration was to be organized as a career service, with selection on the basis of merit, reasonable assurance of tenure, an orderly

40 *Ibid.*, p. 744.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 745.

42 Columbia University, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, David Owen papers (henceforth CU, RBML, DOP), Box 6, 'Eric Biddle, Dag Hammarskjöld, miscellaneous', Folder 'Dag Hammarskjöld correspondence 1953–61 (2)', F. Tickner, 'The improvement of public administration'.

43 UN Division for Public Administration and Development Management, *The contribution of the United Nations to the improvement of public administration: a 60-year history*, New York: United Nations, 2009.

classification of positions, a transparent salary plan, opportunities for promotion on the basis of merit, and a system of retirement. For further efficiency, governmental functions would have to be reassigned. Moving beyond the idea of rational organization, UN publications also promoted the idea that successful public administration depended on skilled personnel: namely, on experienced senior administrators, who understood human psychology and would be able to foster morale among their employees.⁴⁴

Although UN publications treated public administration as a universal science or skill, one scholar observed that UN thinking and practice in the field were deeply steeped in the Anglo-American tradition of the discipline.⁴⁵ UN assistance in public administration was moreover based on the theory that politics and administration constituted separate realms. Some authors conceded that this vision ‘did not fit into the actual realities of life’.⁴⁶ By contrast, few Secretariat members noted the irony of the UN, with its infamously byzantine organizational structure, claiming expertise in administrative matters. A 1951 UN report stated that a permanent improvement in public administration could only be realized if based upon certain values and standards, such as political democracy, government stability, the rule of law, respect for fundamental human rights, and enlightened public opinion. The UN Charter precluded the organization from directly intervening in national affairs to promote these ‘fundamentals’ of public administration. The Secretariat thus emphasized the promotion of techniques of public administration, while ‘preaching goals and values at the same time and hoping that form [would] rise to function’.⁴⁷

One of the very first UN technical assistance missions to a member state, a 1950 survey expedition by a group of specialized experts to Bolivia (led by Hugh Keenleyside, a Canadian civil servant who would later become head of the Secretariat’s Technical Assistance Administration) went a step further than advice or training and the preaching of goals and values. It provided the most immediate inspiration for Hammarskjöld’s international administrative service. The mission had gone to Bolivia to examine the reasons for the country’s economic troubles and suggest possible solutions. Its concluding report identified governmental instability and administrative inexperience as the main obstacles to a functioning state and successful development, proposing the placement of foreign experts, so-called ‘UN administrative assistants’, into the country’s civil service to carry out rather than merely advise on policies. Yet, because of its unorthodox nature, the subsequent negotiation of the ‘administrative assistants’ arrangement with Bolivia was no easy feat, dragging on for almost two years.⁴⁸

A few months after taking office in 1953, Hammarskjöld opined on the ‘exceptional character’ of the Bolivian programme that had eventually been launched in 1952. He thought that the experiment ought to draw the attention of anyone even cursorily interested in

44 Guy Sinclair, ‘Government before governance: the United Nations, public administration, and the making of postcolonial states’, unpublished paper for ‘Technologies of stateness: international organizations and the making of states’ workshop, European University Institute, Florence, 15–16 September 2016; Guy Sinclair, *To reform the world: the legal powers of international organizations and the making of modern states*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

45 Muhammad, ‘UN technical assistance’, pp. 142–3, 145, 329.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 331.

48 See Eva-Maria Muschik, ‘Building states through international development assistance: the United Nations between trusteeship and self-determination, 1945 to 1965’, PhD thesis, New York University, 2017, chs. 2 and 3.

technical assistance.⁴⁹ Not merely content with replicating the Bolivian experiment through the established channels, the Secretary-General advocated the establishment of a new career service of international administrators available for immediate, temporary dispatch to UN member states. He believed that the provision of this particular type of administrative assistance needed to be readily available to interested governments without bureaucratic or legal hurdles.

Hammar skjöld's proposal for an international administrative service

Hammar skjöld's reformulation of the Bolivian experiment into the idea for an international administrative service had an immediate political cause: in making his proposal, the Secretary-General was responding to and hoping to shape decolonization. His proactive approach towards the dissolution of the European empires dovetailed with his increasing emphasis on preventative instead of merely reactive UN policies more generally. While Hammar skjöld had spent his first two years in office 'quietly and unobtrusively learning the job', by the mid 1950s he pursued a more active role for the UN.⁵⁰ Part of his new approach of 'meeting trouble halfway', as the *Economist* put it in 1960, were extensive tours to Asia and Africa to meet the leaders of new and emerging states and to 'get a first hand idea of their problems'.⁵¹ It was around the time of his first such trip, to twelve countries in the Near East and Asia at the beginning of 1956, that he conceived the idea for the international administrative service.⁵² Hammar skjöld's trip to Asia came on the heels of the 1955 Bandung Conference, in which leading politicians of the postcolonial world had sought to assert their independence in matters of foreign policy. Leaders at Bandung also insisted that the Cold War was distracting the rich world from the much more pressing problem of economic disparities between nations.⁵³

The first draft of the UN proposal for an international administrative service echoed this thinking. It bemoaned the failure of international organizations to come to terms 'with the newly awakened, dynamic forces of nationalism' around the world, and vaguely alluded to the Cold War as the reason for this neglect.⁵⁴ As many as twenty new states had been created during the previous fifteen years 'and there [was] every prospect that they [would] soon be joined by others the end of whose dependent status is now in sight'.⁵⁵ In 1955 alone, sixteen new countries from Asia and Africa were admitted to the UN, and another three African countries in 1956. As seen from the perspective of the UN, decolonization was rapidly advancing and the final result would be a multitude of newly independent, sovereign nation-states.

49 CU, RBML, Carter Goodrich papers, Box 42, 'Bolivia materials', Folder 'Bolivia since return', MS#0501, letter from Dag Hammar skjöld to Carter Goodrich, 30 September 1953.

50 Urquhart, *Hammar skjöld*, pp. 253, 255.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 259, 380. See also 'Mr. Hammar skjöld, we presume', *Economist*, 2 January 1960.

52 Urquhart, *Hammar skjöld*, pp. 256, 380.

53 Robert Vitalis, 'The midnight ride of Kwame Nkrumah and other fables of Bandung (Ban-Doong)', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 4, 2, 2013, pp. 261–88; Jeffrey James Byrne, 'Beyond continents, colours, and the Cold War: Yugoslavia, Algeria, and the struggle for non-alignment', *International History Review*, 37, 5, 2015, pp. 912–32.

54 Hammar skjöld spoke of the 'frustrations and disappointments which have inevitably attended a fundamental re-alignment of political power in the atomic age'. CU, RBML, DOP, Box 6, 'Eric Biddle, Dag Hammar skjöld, miscellaneous', Folder 'Dag Hammar skjöld correspondence 1953–61 (2)', David Owen, 'Draft of McGill speech', 18 May 1956.

55 *Ibid.*

Thinking beyond the formal recognition of national independence, the UN proposal stressed the need to establish sovereignty on secure foundations. It was far too easily assumed that formal recognition of political independence was enough, even though ‘the economic and social organization of all the newcomers [had not] kept pace with the evolution of their political status’.⁵⁶ Most crucially, in the eyes of the UN, the administrative arrangements of the new polities fell far short of the requirements of an independent modern state. This posed a grave problem because the capacity of a country to absorb large-scale economic assistance and to make best use of domestic resources was ‘determined by the character of its administrative arrangements and by the caliber of its public servants’.⁵⁷ In every one of the reports of the economic survey missions sent out by the United Nations and the World Bank, some reference was made ‘to the handicap imposed by poorly developed public administration and the shortage of competent officials’.⁵⁸

The draft proposal emphasized that noting this weakness constituted no disparagement of any of the new nations: ‘No one could fail to be impressed by the magnitude of the tasks with which the new leaders were grappling, or by the truly heroic character of their effort.’⁵⁹ Most had had very little time to replace the colonial arrangements with their own organization. And even where former ‘administering authorities’, as imperial powers were called in UN-speak, had built up efficient administrative structures and sizeable cadres of local bureaucrats, they could ‘not meet the needs of peoples whose awakening [had] stirred deeper feelings of hope and endeavour than were felt under the most enlightened colonial regime’.⁶⁰ In other words, to meet the revolution of rising expectations in the developing world, skilled foreign administrators were needed above all.

The Secretary-General argued that the problem was essentially ‘a question of social structure’. There were usually highly qualified men governing the newly independent states, who were held back, however, by serious personnel shortages further down the administrative line:

if you take some countries in Africa or Asia you find a curious structure ... you find a small, leading group – intellectual and very often with Western training ... But you have not got what we in the West would call the fairly broad and solid middle class ... from which ... the administrations in the West recruit most of their people. ... That will come the moment we get the proper kind of economic and social development. It will grow naturally, as it has grown in the West.⁶¹

Despite Hammarskjöld’s insistence elsewhere that each country had to ‘find its own way, its own balance, its own form’, this quotation reveals his ideas about the normal, desirable course of development: namely, that new countries, if supported by the UN, would ‘naturally’ become more like ‘the West’.⁶² His initiative for an international administrative service can thus be read as an attempt to steer decolonization in a direction in harmony with undefined ‘Western’ ideas of ‘proper’ development through purportedly apolitical administration.

56 *Ibid.*

57 *Ibid.*

58 ‘Address by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld’.

59 Owen, ‘Draft of McGill speech’.

60 ‘Address by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld’.

61 CU, RBML, DOP, Box 6, ‘Eric Biddle, Dag Hammarskjöld, miscellaneous’, Folder ‘Dag Hammarskjöld correspondence 1953–61 (2)’, United Nations, ‘Note no. 1319, note to correspondents: transcript of the Secretary-General’s press conference held at ICAO headquarters, Montréal, 30 May 1956’, 8 June 1956.

62 ‘Address by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld’.

After Hammarskjöld first publicly announced his proposal in a speech to law students at McGill University, a journalist in Montreal pressed him for his personal opinion on whether any particular system was better suited than others to bring about development, presenting Hammarskjöld with the eclectic choice between ‘free enterprise, Communism, Socialism, [and] Social Credit’. In response, Hammarskjöld expressed his personal hope of getting developing countries into a system where economic life was self-sustaining, without any policy measures. ‘In that sense’, he told the press, ‘you may find [my ideas] rather liberal in ... ideology, and [they] certainly [are] in [their] intentions’. Nevertheless, the Secretary-General thought that even ‘the most staunch liberals’ had to recognize that private initiative sometimes fell short of the need. He argued that economic development of developing countries was a risky business rather than a safe, income-yielding enterprise. ‘Political common sense and responsibility’ therefore had to come into play in most countries to supplement and, more importantly, to prepare the ground for private initiatives.⁶³ The UN Secretary-General advocated free-market capitalism, adding the caveat that international assistance in support of public initiative would have to pave the way and create favourable conditions for such an economic system to thrive in developing countries.

In the long run, Hammarskjöld was convinced that national training programmes would meet the personnel needs of the new nations.⁶⁴ But, before this could be the case, UN assistance might be the make-or-break factor in setting countries on their path to development. In responding to decolonization, he emphasized again and again that time was of the essence: ‘What we need is ... to be able to grant the assistance ... with the necessary speed, at the right moment, when there is a kind of sur[plus]-value on all that we can do.’⁶⁵ The period immediately after constitutional independence was characterized by a general uncertainty: many colonial administrators would leave the country, investors would hold back, and metropolitan funds would no longer be available. ‘The UN’, Hammarskjöld suggested, ‘should be there as a kind of stopgap organisation, it [could] come in with the assistance needed during those days when assistance [was] a necessity, but when on the other hand, the government [needed] leisure to look around, to orient itself, to find its lines’. The UN, in other words, should provide the new polities ‘with a little bit of elbow room’.⁶⁶

The Secretary-General believed that other outside assistance, especially from former colonial powers, needed ‘the wider setting provided by the UN’. However, he argued inconsistently that help ‘could then be given not as an act of patronage but as from a senior to a junior brother, both having equal rights, self-respect and *potentially* equal status’.⁶⁷ The bridge from the past to the future that all Western colonial powers would have to find would best be provided by the UN, which, according to Hammarskjöld, was free of suspicions of Western initiatives. UN assistance would thus come ‘without in any way getting that unpleasant over-tone of dependence on any one country’.⁶⁸ In the same vein, the Secretary-General strongly warned against pushing his proposal in any paternal way: ‘An idea like [the international

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Ibid.*

65 United Nations, press release SG/908, ‘Statement by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld before the Economic and Social Council on International Cooperation on behalf of former trust territories which have become independent’, 14 April 1960.

66 ‘Address by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld’.

67 *Ibid.*

68 Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld*, pp. 384–5.

administrative service] ... is something which has to be asked for, properly understood, and sponsored by the countries in need – not by the countries which wish to render services.’⁶⁹ He was simply enlarging the general discussion of economic development, ‘bringing sharply into focus the existence of a major problem’. ‘This is the sort of case’, Hammarskjöld told the press, ‘where I do feel that the international community has a responsibility which it could fill.’ In the end, it was up to the UN member governments to decide how best to tackle the problem.⁷⁰

The image of the UN as a bridge between imperial powers and their former territories was a favourite trope of the Secretary-General. Alluding to the bridging function, Hammarskjöld once compared French relations with Africa to a good martini, allegedly telling Andre Malraux that ‘France might be the gin, but the UN was definitely the angosturas.’⁷¹ Yet his proposal for an international administrative service in fact put the organization into direct competition with the metropolitan powers, also seeking to manage the newly independent bureaucracies of their former colonies. French colonial administrators who continued to work for newly independent governments, for example, had the option of joining the metropolitan civil service once their employment abroad was discontinued. Alternatively, they could join two newly created corps for service abroad established within the Ministry of Overseas Departments and Territories: the *corps des conseillers des affaires d’outre-mer* for mid-level specialists, and the *corps des administrateurs des affaires d’outre-mer* for more senior administrators.⁷²

Only two weeks prior to Hammarskjöld’s McGill speech, the British government had announced its determination to establish ‘a central pool of officers with exceptional administrative and professional qualifications’ to be employed by Her Majesty’s Government for secondment to overseas governments.⁷³ The proposal was only a partial victory for the Colonial Office, which had hoped to realize a career service with Commonwealth-wide remit to secure continuous employment abroad of all former British colonial servants.⁷⁴ The proposed pool of administrative officers fell short of providing British civil servants with the necessary security that might have encouraged their continued employment in the territories transitioning towards self-government.⁷⁵ Indeed, the proposal did little to impede a ‘flood of expatriate retirements’, as British colonies turned into newly independent states.⁷⁶

Nigeria, which was the largest territory in the British colonial empire in 1956, presented a particularly pressing case. ‘Localization’ of the administrative services – that is, incorporating Africans – had never been a priority of the colonial government.⁷⁷ It was the prospect of a government breakdown ‘of mammoth proportions’ that had led an anxious Colonial Office to press the British Cabinet to create the abovementioned career service of administrative officers

69 United Nations, ‘Note on ICAO press conference, Montréal, 30 May 1956’.

70 ‘Address by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld’.

71 Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld*, pp. 384–5.

72 Unfortunately, Anthony H. M. Kirk-Greene, *Britain’s imperial administrators, 1858–1966*, New York: St Martin’s Press, 2000, p. 162, does not mention when the services were created. See also Teresa Hayter, *French aid*, London: Overseas Development Institute, 1966. On the Africanization of French colonial state bureaucracies, see Michelle Pinto, ‘Employment, education, and the reconfiguration of empire: Africanization in postwar French Africa’, PhD thesis, New York University, 2013. On the absorption of a number of French colonial servants into the emerging European aid bureaucracy, see Véronique Dimier, *The invention of a European development aid bureaucracy: recycling empire*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

73 ‘Secure jobs in overseas civil service guaranteed: central pool of officers to be set up – from our political correspondent’, *Manchester Guardian*, 18 May 1956.

74 Kirk-Greene, *Britain’s imperial administrators*, p. 264.

75 ‘Secure jobs’.

76 Kirk-Greene, *Britain’s imperial administrators*, p. 255.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 254.

for overseas service.⁷⁸ The British scheme, however, failed to attract enough colonial administrators in Nigeria: only 400 out of 2,000 eligible officers chose to join. Faced with an impending staffing crisis, representatives of the emerging Nigerian state set out on a recruiting mission to the US, Canada, and Europe in 1957, in search of some 600 employees. The Nigerians, according to a UN official who consulted with the mission, had expressed disappointment that the UN did not yet possess the means and facilities for meeting their needs. The official noted that '[The] present [UN] technical assistance programs [could] only serve a very different and, in their view, supplementary purpose.'⁷⁹ He felt that the new nations' fundamental requirements were best addressed by the Secretary-General's proposal for an international administrative service.

Intergovernmental decision-making and Secretariat lobbying

Hammarskjöld introduced the idea for an international administrative service into the UN intergovernmental discussions in his annual report to the General Assembly in 1956. He was confident about the prospect of a speedy ratification of his proposal, given a favourable press and his prior consultation with 'key people on both sides' (presumably government representatives of potentially interested countries as well as donor nations).⁸⁰ Instead of a swift acceptance, however, the study and discussion of Hammarskjöld's proposal bounced back and forth between various UN intergovernmental bodies for four years. While decision-making was in the hands of UN member governments, the Secretariat worked behind the scenes, lobbying potential recipient as well as donor nations and tweaking reports and discussion papers on the subject. 'This time', one UN official noted after the first round of inconclusive governmental debates, 'nothing that is possible to arrange should be left to chance.'⁸¹ Nevertheless, it took two years until UN member states could agree to start the service on an experimental basis, another for the programme to get started, and yet another for it to become a permanent feature of UN assistance. The cumbersome process of UN decision-making does not suffice to explain this lengthy ordeal. The topic proved highly contentious, for, in discussing Hammarskjöld's proposal, government representatives set out to negotiate the meaning of state sovereignty and self-determination for an inherently unequal postcolonial world, and the role that international actors were to play in it.

Perhaps surprisingly, there was no neat East/West or what one might today call global North/South divide in the discussions. Certain factions strongly supported the proposal from the start. Non-metropolitan Western countries, such as Ireland, Austria, and Canada, presumably saw a welcome opportunity to gain influence overseas by sending their nationals abroad.⁸² Delegates from various potential recipient countries, such as Pakistan and Sudan,

78 Anthony Kirk-Greene, 'Decolonization: the ultimate diaspora', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 36, 1, 2001, p. 140.

79 United Nations Archives and Records Management Section (henceforth UNARMS), S-0175-2295-0003, Wieschoff to Roberston, 20 June 1957.

80 UNARMS, S-0847-0002-0004, Secretary-General's 'private meetings' with under-secretaries-general 1956, 'Secretary General's private meeting no. 100, 1 June 1956'; 'A world civil service', *New York Times*, 23 June 1957.

81 UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0004, Memo for Hammarskjöld, 28 August 1957.

82 UNGA, A/C.2/SR.533, Thirteenth Session, Second Committee, Summary records of 533rd meeting, 24 October 1958; UNARMS, S-0175-2296-0001, Keenleyside to Lind, 12 May 1958; S-0175-2296-0001, Matsch to Secretariat, 9 May 1958.

wholeheartedly welcomed the potential benefit they might derive from the Secretary-General's initiative, pointing out that it might be hard 'for those coming from countries with long-established and efficient civil services to appreciate the difficulties by which other countries were beset in solving the extremely complex problems of modern administration'.⁸³

There were three groups of countries – communist, imperial, and developing – that proved staunchly opposed to the UN initiative. Eastern European countries, which constituted the only unified voting block at the UN, were opposed to it, although some socialist countries showed a measure of independence: Poland, for example, expressed sympathy to the proposal but objected on financial grounds. Ilya Gaiduk suggests that Moscow did not issue strict orders to the UN delegations of its satellite states. According to him, they were allowed 'a normal amount of discretion', but themselves usually sought to coordinate their policies at the UN in advance with the Soviets.⁸⁴ The official Soviet line was that administration was inherently political and thus not the business of UN officials. The Czechoslovak delegate warned that host countries faced the risk of a 'birth of neo-colonialism, interference in their domestic affairs, and the impairment of their sovereignty'.⁸⁵ Less loudly, socialist representatives expressed discontent with the fact that UN experts were overwhelmingly drawn from 'a restricted group of countries' from the capitalist world.⁸⁶ As seen from east of the Iron Curtain, UN assistance to newly independent states was hardly as neutral as Hammarskjöld presented it to be.

Representatives of European colonial powers also took issue with Hammarskjöld's vision of a proactive UN. In the words of the British delegate:

It was no function of the United Nations to act as a kind of international government ... the United Nations was to provide a forum for international discussion of common problems and a channel through which help and advice could be sought. ... [Hammarskjöld's proposed service] could lead to a degree of central control of under-developed countries' policies – a direction in which [the British] delegation would not like to see the United Nations move.⁸⁷

Privately, British officials complained about 'signs of "Empire building" among members of the [UN] Secretariat who were toying with the alluring prospect of finding big important jobs for themselves and their friends administering colonial territories, when the present colonial powers withdraw'.⁸⁸ India and Egypt likewise expressed concern about UN overreach, fearing that such assistance might reflect badly on developing countries as a group.⁸⁹ In contrast, delegates from Mexico and Argentina worried that the UN would open itself up to criticism if it became involved in national governance, thus jeopardizing the organization's assistance activities a whole.⁹⁰

83 UN Economic and Social Council (henceforth ECOSOC), Technical Assistance Committee (henceforth TAC), E/TAC/SR.146, Summary records of the 146th meeting on 19 July 1957, 18 September 1957, p. 13.

84 Ilya Gaiduk, *Divided together: the United States and the Soviet Union in the United Nations, 1945–1965*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013.

85 UNGA, A/C.2./SR.545, 6 November 1958, p. 139.

86 UNGA, A/C.2./SR.544, 5 November 1958, p. 135.

87 ECOSOC, E/SR.942, Twenty-second Session, Summary records of 942nd meeting, 24 July 1956, p. 152, para. 22.

88 Ulrich Lohrmann, *Voices from Tanganyika: Great Britain, the United Nations and the decolonization of a trust territory, 1946–1961*, Berlin: Dr. W Hopf, 2007, p. 249.

89 UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0004, memo for the Secretary-General by Keenleyside, 28 August 1957.

90 ECOSOC, TAC, E/TAC/SR.163, Summary record of 163rd meeting on 7 July 1958, 19 September 1958, pp. 10–11; UNGA, A/C.2./SR.595, 19 October 1959, p. 65, para. 22; UNGA, A/C.2./SR.708, 5 December 1960, pp. 383–4.

The specialized agencies of the UN (the FAO, the WHO, UNESCO, and the ILO, to name only the most important ones) also chimed in on the topic, voicing their strong opposition to Hammarskjöld's initiative. Jealously guarding their fields of expertise, the directors-general of the agencies were anxious to mark their territory. They feared that the establishment of a centralized international administrative service might prejudice the relationships the agencies had already established with developing countries and thus impair their own work.⁹¹ They further insisted on the primary importance and desirability of international and national administration training centres. Although the agencies had no decision-making power, their representatives sat in on intergovernmental meetings related to technical assistance, took part in the discussions, and, as proven providers of assistance, wielded a certain influence on aid-receiving countries.

The FAO–Indian relationship provides a possible example of a specialized agency wielding a certain influence over a member state's attitude towards Hammarskjöld's initiative. The Director-General of the FAO, B. R. Sen, a decorated former Indian civil servant and diplomat, had initially rejected the proposal for its 'neo-colonial implications'. This was echoed in the Indian position that Hammarskjöld's proposal reflected badly on developing countries as a group, suggesting that they were incapable of governing themselves. Extensive correspondence with Hammarskjöld, however, mitigated Sen's initial hostility and India was likewise 'persuaded to see the light', as one Secretariat official put it, accepting the proposal in principle.⁹²

Some countries sought to steer a middle course or, in the case of the US, to 'balance awkwardly on the median strip in the middle of the road'.⁹³ Americans showed no particular interest in Hammarskjöld's programme as a desirable way of handling decolonization. Rather, US policy-makers sought to square the circle of siding with their imperial allies (most importantly Great Britain) without antagonizing representatives of those countries they were simultaneously courting in the Cold War battle for the 'hearts and minds' of the developing world.⁹⁴ In the classic international organization move to avoid any decision-making, the US representative thus confined himself to suggesting 'further study' of Hammarskjöld's proposal.

Others took a more constructive approach. The Indonesian delegate, for example, revived the 1948 Brazilian proposal for an international public administration research and training centre. Insisting that 'fresh approaches' to developing countries' problems were needed, he rejected Hammarskjöld's vision of developing countries simply following in the footsteps of 'the West'. In the absence of such an institute, he warned, perhaps with an eye to van Mook being in charge of UN assistance in public administration, that the proposed career service would run the risk of being 'manned by persons with outdated or invalid assumptions and preconceptions regarding under-developed countries, or ... [of becoming] a mere employment agency for former colonial administrators'.⁹⁵

91 UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0003, Hill to De Seynes, 6 May 1957.

92 UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0004, Memo for the Secretary-General by Keenleyside, 28 August 1957; UNARMS, S-0175-2296-0001, Sen to Hammarskjöld, 19 February 1958, and Hammarskjöld to Sen, 10 March 1958; UNARMS, S-0175-2296-0001, Taylor to Keenleyside, 13 February 1958.

93 Caroline Pruden, *Conditional partners: Eisenhower, the United Nations, and the search for a permanent peace*, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1998, p. 194; Gaiduk, *Divided together*.

94 For shifting US attitudes towards European colonialism, see William Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson, 'The imperialism of decolonization', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22, 3, 1994, pp. 462–511; see also Matthew Connelly, 'Taking off the Cold War lens: visions of North–South conflict during the Algerian War for Independence', *American Historical Review*, 105, 3, 2000, pp. 739–69.

95 UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0003, 'Statement by Dr. R.A. Asmaun to the 23rd session of ECOSOC', 24 April 1957, p. 4.

While the Indonesian motion proved unsuccessful, other countries' recommendations carried the day. The Burmese delegate proposed that 'As administrative duties frequently acquired political aspects it would be preferable to limit the role of the internationally-recruited specialists to purely technical matters and to speak of an "international technical (or specialist) service"'.⁹⁶ Ceylon agreed, suggesting that the principal demand was for experts to perform executive and operational duties. Hammar skjöld was quick to reassure them that experts becoming involved in political issues 'would be directly contrary to the whole idea of the service', explaining that the experts appointed under the service would 'be basically technicians. Policy [would] be the exclusive responsibility of the Government.'⁹⁷

Between intergovernmental meetings, UN officials worked hard to see some version of Hammar skjöld's proposal come to life. When the General Assembly asked the Secretariat to report on member states' views on the proposal after the first round of discussions, the Secretariat interpreted its mandate to invite comments somewhat selectively and did not solicit the opinion of any socialist countries. (The exception was Yugoslavia, which, as opposed to other socialist countries, contributed to and took advantage of the UN assistance programme from its inception.) The Soviet bloc had only reluctantly joined the UN assistance programmes after 1953, having initially denounced such activities as an imperialist design to exploit the resources of poorer countries. And even after belatedly signing on, the socialist contribution to the UN assistance budget remained minimal, hovering around 5% throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s – as opposed to the 87% shouldered by western European and North American countries. (Accounting for 54% of the total budget, the US was by far the largest contributor to UN assistance programmes, followed by the UK with an 8% share, and Canada and France with a 5% share each.)⁹⁸ UN officials clearly felt safe in circumventing the countries likely to play only a negligible role in any additional UN assistance scheme. This of course demonstrates the hollowness of the organization's claim to neutrality and universal representation, and Hammar skjöld's suggestion that UN assistance was free of suspicions of Western initiatives.⁹⁹

UN officials first approached potential aid recipients about their position on an international administrative service. After gathering sufficient proof of interest on the part of enough developing countries, the Secretariat then approached potential donor nations through letters, as well as through visits of high-level UN officials to Western capitals. While initial responses, collected in the UN archives, appear at least mixed, the Secretariat was able to present the overall feedback as overwhelmingly positive, since the great majority of countries – and even the specialized agencies – agreed to the proposal 'in principle'. Through a selective reading of responses from an already curated group of governments, UN officials were ultimately able to suggest that there was 'overwhelming support' for Hammar skjöld's proposal. This, it appears, ultimately swayed the naysaying governments, or at least pushed them to go along grudgingly and abstain from outright opposition to Hammar skjöld's proposal.

96 UNGA, A/C.2/SR.530, 20 October 1958, p. 70, para. 26.

97 UNGA, A/C.2/SR.544, 5 November 1958, p. 135, paras. 4–5, and p. 137, para. 26; UNGA, A/C.2/L.379, 'Programmes of technical assistance: establishment of an international administrative service', Statement by the Secretary-General at the 539th meeting of the Second Committee of the General Assembly, 30 October 1958.

98 Stokke, *UN and development*, p. 73; Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *The Soviets in international organizations: changing policy toward developing countries, 1953–1963*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964.

99 Urquhart, *Hammar skjöld*, p. 384.

Yet the result of the extended intergovernmental deliberations, the UN 'Programme for the Provision of Operational and Executive Personnel' (OPEX), which the UN Secretariat launched on an experimental basis in 1959, was no clear-cut victory for Hammarskjöld and his employees. The endless reports, discussions, and resolutions on the topic substantially changed the nature of the Secretary-General's original proposal. Where Hammarskjöld had envisioned a service that would offer seasoned administrators the prospect of a permanent career, governments insisted on the 'self-liquidating' and necessarily temporary nature of any international administrative assistance. Although the Secretary-General had toyed with the idea of establishing a new agency, member states decided to make use of existing UN resources, namely the regular budget of the organization and the staff of the Secretariat in New York. Where Hammarskjöld had originally thought of dispatching versatile general administrators to relatively senior positions, recipient governments displayed greater interest in technicians in specialized fields such as meteorology or telecommunications to occupy the mid-level ranks of their administrations. OPEX was, in the eyes of one observer at the time, a 'poor little thing for a big idea'.¹⁰⁰

The mere acceptance of OPEX, however, marked a significant shift in UN member states' attitudes towards national sovereignty and outside interference. A 1960 study of the topic noted that 'Not more than ten years ago public administration was considered too sensitive a topic for outside experts.'¹⁰¹ Now, a majority of governments came to accept the theory that politics and administration were separate realms, and, whereas the former did not lend itself to outside intervention, assistance with the latter constituted no infringement of state sovereignty. UN officials for their part hoped that form would give rise to function: that purportedly apolitical administration would serve to steer decolonization in a direction in harmony with vaguely defined 'Western' ideas of proper development.

The UN Programme for Operational and Executive Personnel (OPEX)

Run with a skeletal staff by UN Secretariat officials and the modest amount of US\$250,000 from the regular UN budget, OPEX had a slow start in 1959.¹⁰² That first year, only ten UN officials were dispatched under the programme. Among them were a director of broadcasting in Jamaica, a general manager at the Nepal Bank in Kathmandu, an air traffic controller in Tunisia, a director for the National Centre for Administrative Studies in Laos, and an administrative director at the Finance Ministry in Panama.¹⁰³ Increasing demands for OPEX-type assistance convinced a majority of governments to end the initial 'experimental period' the following year and put the scheme on a continuing basis in 1960.¹⁰⁴ The same year, sixteen new African member states were admitted to the UN, yet only nineteen appointments were made through the OPEX programme. This hardly constituted the world-scale response to

100 Muhammad, 'UN technical assistance', p. 273.

101 *Ibid.*

102 UNGA, A/4212, 'Technical assistance in public administration: provision of operational, executive and administrative personnel' report by the Secretary General, 14 September 1959; UNARMS, S-0175-2297-0002, Review of OPEX for US State Department, 11 December 1963.

103 *Yearbook of the United Nations 1959*, New York: United Nations, 1960, part 1, section 2, ch. 3, p. 129.

104 UNGA, A/RES/1530(XV), 'United Nations assistance in public administration: provision of operational, executive and administrative personnel', 15 December 1960.

decolonization that Hammarskjöld had originally envisioned. UN officials warned that, without a substantial increase in allocated funds, there would be no resources to take care of burgeoning African needs.¹⁰⁵

Limited funds, however, were not the only obstacle to an expansion of the programme. Since the inception of OPEX, recruitment of personnel under the new scheme had proved difficult. As OPEX appointments served individual member states rather than the world organization, they were not entitled to standard UN benefits and diplomatic privileges, such as prolonged annual leave, medical coverage, and customs exemption. The Secretariat in New York spent much time ‘ironing out difficulties’ to ensure that the conditions of service between OPEX officers and regular UN employees were equated, to only limited success.¹⁰⁶ Although US\$850,000 was allocated to the OPEX programme in 1961, only US\$350,000 was used because of serious recruitment difficulties.¹⁰⁷ Even while member states’ demands for administrative assistance steadily increased, the UN Secretariat found it difficult to convince governments of the need for expanded OPEX allocations.

At the same time, the Congo crisis that followed the hasty retreat of the Belgian colonial power in 1960 dramatized the breakdown of public services as a result of decolonization. The UN Secretariat tried to harness the threat of a multiplication of ‘potential Congo situations’ to persuade ‘the Governments which [had] a principal interest in avoiding disaster (e.g. UK) ... to make supplementary [voluntary] contributions’ to the UN, earmarked for administrative assistance.¹⁰⁸ Voluntary contributions for UN assistance, however, were usually funnelled through the Expanded Programme for Technical Assistance (EPTA), reserved for regular advisory services. OPEX, by contrast, had been funded through the regular UN budget, as approved by the General Assembly. This arrangement underlined the separate, experimental status of the OPEX programme, but also reflected UN officials’ initial hope that the service would eventually grow into an autonomous UN agency that would cater to the administrative needs of newly independent countries.

When this prospect seemed more and more unlikely, Secretariat officials began to lobby for permission to use EPTA funds for OPEX purposes. They presented the idea by way of the Libyan delegation to the General Assembly, which approved it in December 1963. (Since the Secretariat had not only prepared the Libyan delegate’s speech on the topic but had also written the draft of the resolution sponsored by Libya, it claimed ‘a pretty large hand in getting this matter through’.¹⁰⁹) Using regular UN technical assistance funds for OPEX appointments constituted a first step in blurring the line between advisory and operational assistance.

Another step in that direction can also be traced to the Congo crisis, as a result of which the specialized agencies threw their initial misgivings about non-advisory assistance overboard and set out to develop their own OPEX-type services. The UN’s military and civilian response to the crisis, launched in the summer of 1960, encompassed the largest deployment of UN technical assistance to date. While UNESCO was called upon to recruit teachers and keep the bare minimum of educational services going as Belgian educators hastily left the country, the

105 UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0005, MacCabe to Gardiner, 19 October 1961.

106 UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0005, Gardiner to Coates, 15 November 1961. In 1963, the Secretariat still struggled with the reputation of OPEX appointments as ‘second-class’: see UNARMS, S-0175-2296-0004, MacCabe to Luna, 18 March 1963.

107 UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0005, Tickner to De Seynes, 7 March 1962.

108 UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0005, Symonds to Owen, 26 January 1962.

109 UNARMS, S-0175-2297-0002, MacCabe to Hoo, 10 December 1963.

WHO stepped in to staff Congolese hospitals. Subsequently, both UNESCO and the WHO started discussing the provision of teachers and doctors as necessary operational assistance to newly independent states more generally.¹¹⁰ They saw the task as being not so much to build up new services but to prevent the collapse of existing ones.¹¹¹ OPEX also had repercussions beyond the realm of the UN system. In 1964, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) organized a conference to discuss technical assistance to East Africa, including the provision of operational personnel. According to one UN official, delegates '[drew] heavily upon UN forms of agreement and contract for defining the terms and conditions of service for both advisory ... and operational personnel'.¹¹²

Hammarskjöld and his employees were initially unhappy about the proliferation of OPEX-like schemes outside the immediate purview of the UN Secretariat.¹¹³ They feared that a loss of Secretariat control and alternating conditions of service would lead to a general blurring of lines between advisory and operational experts. They were anxious that 'bars [would] be dropped so that technical assistance advisors [could] freely serve in an OPEX-like capacity' without the necessary safeguards that protected OPEX officers from national jurisdictions.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, important aspects of the original OPEX programme, such as on-the-job training of local counterparts or the fact that countries had to pay for foreign specialists themselves, so that they would budget accordingly and eventually fill the post with local staff, would be lost as a result of this blurring of lines. Yet UN officials conceded that a great need for operational personnel in newly independent states existed, a need that could never be satisfied with the meagre resources of the OPEX programme (even if supported by EPTA funds).¹¹⁵ They concluded that the more operational posts were on offer, the better the needs of newly sovereign states could be met.¹¹⁶ Some even thought that, if the specialized agencies established their own programmes, this would allow the Secretariat to reserve their own funds for operational personnel for high-level executive posts.¹¹⁷

Staffing high-level administrative posts, as well as 'a massive appeal' for the UN to respond to the needs of newly independent states, remained wishful thinking on the part of the Secretariat.¹¹⁸ A 1967 in-house evaluation of UN operational assistance noted that 'bilateral assistance of the OPEX type far [exceeded] OPEX assistance provided under the programmes of the United Nations family'.¹¹⁹ (In French-speaking Africa, only one or two countries received OPEX assistance from the United Nations family and that on a modest scale. The English-speaking countries were the predominant users of OPEX assistance, but they too depended far more on bilateral assistance.) Governments of virtually all African countries that

110 UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0005, Interoffice memorandum, Luker to Malinowski, 23 January 1962, and Luker to Malinowski, 21 May 1962.

111 Luker to Malinowski, 23 January 1962.

112 UNARMS, S-0175-2297-0003, MacCabe to Mendez, 14 December 1964.

113 UNARMS, S-0175-2297-0001, Hill to Abbas, 8 November 1960.

114 UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0005, MacDiarmid to Owen, 3 July 1962; UNARMS, S-0175-2296-0003, MacDiarmid to Huyser, 8 November 1962.

115 MacDiarmid to Owen, 3 July 1962.

116 UNARMS, S-0175-2297-0001, Note by Bapat on UNESCO proposal, 8 November 1960.

117 UNARMS, S-0175-2296-0004, Report on Commissioners' Meeting on 18 January 1963, 21 January 1963; UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0005, MacCabe to Emmerich, 2 July 1962.

118 UNARMS, S-0175-2295-0005, Symonds to Owen, 26 January 1962.

119 UNDP, DP/TAL.15, 'Policy matters: operational assistance under the technical assistance component', 1 December 1967, Report by the Administrator to the UNDP Governing Council, 5th session, 9–24 January 1968, p. 4.

had gained independence since the Second World War, as well as some countries in Asia and the Far East, made extensive use of OPEX-type services. Yet governments preferred bilateral over UN assistance because it allowed them to arrange appointments more quickly and with greater flexibility in terms of extensions.¹²⁰

Another study, conducted for the Ford Foundation, noted that about half of the British government's technical assistance expenditure of no less than £25 million in 1962–63 was spent on British personnel employed in public service posts by overseas governments. In East Africa, 90% of British technical assistance in 1962–63 was of that sort.¹²¹ As the study explained:

large numbers of people supplied to developing countries ... are carrying on as engineers, policemen, tax collectors, doctors, veterinary or agricultural officers, etc., much as they served under the colonial regimes. Many of them do not 'advise' or 'train counterparts'; they 'do the job'. In actual practice, then, technical assistance programs are not exclusively concerned with technical matters, nor only with teaching and advising.¹²²

The UN programme did not fare better with regard to training than the bilateral programmes. The 1967 in-house evaluation noted that more than half of the 165 OPEX officers in service at the time of writing did not even have 'counterpart personnel', whom they were supposed to train on the job to eventually take over. Nevertheless, the report soberly suggested that 'experts appear to function satisfactorily'. Without noting the irony, the evaluation stated that the international officers, who had originally been summoned to help the new states build proper administrations, 'functioned best' where 'reasonably modern' administrative structures already existed.¹²³

Despite these failures, the increasing reliance of governments on the OPEX programme nevertheless affirmed the value of this type of assistance in the eyes of the UN. By 1964, the once controversial operational services were considered a regular feature of UN assistance; as the head of the UN Secretariat's OPEX division pointed out:

It seems significant that the [1964 UN report on technical assistance] makes no mention of OPEX as such. ... If ... the ... report is any indication, the original concept of OPEX, namely that the provision of operational, executive and administrative personnel should be considered a supplementary form of technical assistance in the field of public administration appears to me to have completely submerged. OPEX appears now to be treated purely as a technique [of technical assistance more generally].¹²⁴

When the various technical assistance programmes of the UN were converted into the UNDP in 1965, the UN found 'ample justification for making the OPEX form of assistance', which had originally been intended to serve as a temporary, post-independence bridge for newly independent states, 'an integral part of the assistance normally provided by

120 *Ibid.*

121 CU, RBML, DOP, Box 20 'Miscellaneous reports', FF-Nbi-36 11/10/65, Frank Sutton (Nairobi, Ford Foundation), 'Technical assistance: an article prepared for the *International encyclopedia of the social sciences*', 1965.

122 *Ibid.*

123 UNDP, DP/TA/L.15, 'Policy matters'.

124 UNARMS, S-0175-2297-0003, Maccabe to Merghani, 3 August 1964.

the [UNDP]'.¹²⁵ Semantically, 'aid' turned into 'cooperation' in the 1960s; in practice, development took a paternalist turn.¹²⁶

Conclusion

Although Hammarskjöld presented the UN as the twentieth-century bridge between European metropolises and their overseas territories, his suggested response to decolonization at the level of international organization instead put the UN in direct competition with the services offered by imperial powers designed to maintain ties with their former colonies. While his proposal did not result in the large-scale response to decolonization that he had hoped for, his action was far from inconsequential. The Secretary-General's initiative ultimately resulted in a substantial shift of attitudes towards development assistance: from the insistence on advisory services and the idea of helping countries help themselves to a more paternalist approach that focused on 'getting the work done' on behalf of aid recipients. A mix of frustration on the part of experts and civil servants about advice not being taken, as well as a feeling of being 'surveyed to death' on the part of developing countries' governments, contributed to this change in attitude during the first fifteen years of UN assistance services.

In practice, the line between advisory and operational development activities had never been as clear-cut as technical assistance theory purported it to be, but the Secretariat had hoped to achieve a separation between the two – and an official recognition of a difference – through the establishment of the OPEX programme. Instead, the eventual dissolution of OPEX within the existing UN technical programme, as well as the proliferation of OPEX-type services within the wider UN family and beyond, blurred the lines between the different types of assistance and officially sanctioned a more interventionist approach to international development as common practice. Ultimately, the UN was not important because of the immediate, practical impact of the organization's development programmes, such as OPEX or its other technical assistance activities. Rather, it was influential in setting forth certain norms: UN initiatives and debates shaped what was soon recognized as the 'natural' course of decolonization, the needs of a newly independent or developing state, and the range of acceptable practices to meet these needs.

Scholars have argued that post-war internationalism sprang from a conviction that the nation-state system was becoming increasingly obsolete.¹²⁷ This article suggests that the establishment of UN development aid not only acknowledged the primacy of that system but also supported the proliferation of the nation-state form on a global scale.¹²⁸ If, as recent scholarship has stressed, this outcome was far from preordained at the outset of decolonization, the question of why this explosion of the nation-state form happened in the 1950s and 1960s – and what kind of sovereignties emerged – becomes all the more pressing.¹²⁹ I have argued that the UN played a considerable role in that process. Under Hammarskjöld's lead,

125 UNDP, DP/TA/L.15, 'Policy matters', p. 7.

126 Stephen Browne, *The United Nations Development Programme and system*, New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 15.

127 Amy L. Sayward, *The birth of development: how the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization, and World Health Organization changed the world, 1945–1965*, Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006.

128 For a similar argument see Sinclair, *Reform the world*.

129 See e.g. Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between empire and nation: remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014; Gary Wilder, *Freedom time: negritude, decolonization, and the future of the world*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.

civil servants in New York shackled the realization of self-determination and the improvement of living standards to the nation-state form. They presented the independent state as the natural outcome of decolonization and colonial subjects' aspirations, and as the prime agent for development. State sovereignty, however, was tied to administrative capacity, and a lack thereof necessitated outside intervention. The story of the UN proposal for an international administrative service thus helps to account for the renegotiation of the meaning of state sovereignty as a result of decolonization and the active role that international actors would come to play in the governance of much of the developing world in the second half of the twentieth century.

Eva-Maria Muschik is a lecturer at the Center for Global History at the Freie Universität Berlin. She completed her PhD in History at New York University in 2016, after spending a year as a predoctoral fellow in International Security Studies at Yale University. In 2016–17 she was a Max Weber postdoctoral fellow at the European University Institute in Florence.