

Hans Singer: The gentle giant¹

A memorial lecture by Richard Jolly²

Today must in part be a memorial – but even more should it be a celebration of one of the true giants of development. Hans Singer was, indeed remains, one of the UN's great heroes, the economist of the twentieth century who focused more creatively, more persistently and for a longer period than any other, on the problems of developing countries and in putting forward proposals about what was needed – and could be done - to accelerate their development.

As Alec Cairncross put it, “Hans's life was anything but cloistered. He made frequent journeys half around the world. There are few developing countries he has not visited and still fewer that he has not advised. He must have addressed a wider variety of academics in a wider variety of places about a wider range of subjects than any other economist, living or dead. He moved from continent to continent, expounding, advocating and devising strategies of economic development. His influence has been felt as much by word of mouth in the succession of countries where he has lectured as through the pile of working documents and published reports that survive him like a spoor from his travels.”

Hans was truly a giant of development - but a gentle giant, small of stature, of modest bearing, with bushy eyebrows, a twinkle in his eye and a welcoming, questioning smile, a friend to many, including many of us who are here today. We will use this occasion to rekindle and together treasure our memories and learn from them.

I would like to speak about the three main phases of Hans's life: his early experiences and studies; his contributions to the UN, finally his work at IDS, ending with a summary of what I see as his lasting contributions to development and the UN.

Hans's early background

Hans's early background holds the secret to much of his character and brilliance. He was born in the Rhineland, in what is now Wuppertal in a Jewish family in a protestant enclave in what was largely a catholic part of Germany. As Hans liked to point out, he grew up as a minority in a minority in a minority – and this gave him a lifelong identification with people who were marginalized.

But as a bright student, Hans was not held back and aged 19 he started his studies in Bonn University, first in medicine but soon switching to economics, attracted by the brilliance

¹ Presented as a lecture in Geneva in the ILO on May 18th, 2006. I owe to Louis Emmerij the apt choice of gentle to indicate Hans's qualities as a giant of the UN and of development. Louis has written his own memoir, Hans Singer - the gentle breeze.

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and stimulation of Josef Schumpeter, then professor of economics. John Shaw, in his excellent biography of Hans, describes how Hans came under the spell of Schumpeter - and how Hans, later in life, came back to realize the deeper relevance of Schumpeter's teaching for development in poorer countries. Schumpeter's message - "History matters. Theory matters. Evolution, not equilibrium, is the central phenomenon."³

Hans started a PhD under Schumpeter's guidance, but switched to Arthur Spiethoff when Schumpeter left for Harvard in 1932. But Nazi influence was growing rapidly and in 1933, "in the nick of time", Hans had to flee, first joining Wolfgang Stolper in Switzerland, then his brother in Istanbul, with the idea of opening a bookshop! But out of the blue, he received a letter from Richard Kahn of Kings, inviting Hans to Cambridge with the hope of a scholarship, the result of a letter to Keynes from Schumpeter recommending Hans as one of his brightest ever studentys. Hans was awarded the scholarship and dashed back to Germany for 3 days - to propose to and marry Ilse Singer. Their partnership lasted 67 years, surely a record in terms of marriage to engagement ratio!

Hans came to Cambridge, where he continued his doctorate studies, becoming the fourth to obtain his doctorate under Keynes. In Cambridge he met many others of talent, including Claude Guillebaud, who later worked for the ILO, and James Meade, who later worked for the ECE, as well as fellow students - Alec Cairncross, David Champernowne, Brian Reddaway and V.K.R.V. Rao. It was Rao who in the early years of the UN proposed the idea of soft loans to developing countries and chaired the working party on SUNFED for which Hans would be the secretary. Austin Robinson, who had been on the committee which awarded Hans the scholarship, was of course part of Keynes's inner circle, along with Joan Robinson and Richard Kahn.

Almost immediately after completing his thesis, Hans was swept up in what became *Men Without Work*, the pioneering study on unemployment in Britain, commissioned by the Pilgrim Trust. The study was overseen by William Beveridge, the economist architect of the British welfare state and Archbishop Temple, the great social reformer of the church. Quite an introduction to social reform in Britain and on the wider world stage! On this study, Hans worked with David Owen, who later became the first economist to be employed in the UN and would be the one, on the steps of Church House when the first General Assembly was being held in London, to first offer Hans a UN post.

At the beginning of the Second World War, Hans was interned for 6 weeks - giving lectures on economic problems to his fellow inmates, before being released at the personal intervention of Keynes and the Archbishop. After this, Hans produced a succession of studies on the German war economy, published as articles in the *Economic Journal*. During the war, Hans also taught economics in Manchester. After the war, he worked briefly in the Ministry of Town and Country Planning before moving to the University of Glasgow. In 1947, he finally responded to the invitation of David Owen and joined the UN.

From personal interviews for the UN history, summarized in *UN Voices*,⁴ we have discovered the importance of early lifetime experiences for generating later commitment and understanding. Hans, one of the first of the 76 we interviewed illustrates this very clearly. But of all the influences on Hans, I particularly like his references to the families of unemployed workers with whom he and the other young researchers stayed while undertaking the study of

³ See John Shaw, citing Wolfgang Stolper, Schumpeter's biographer, D. John Shaw, *Sir Hans Singer: The Life and Work of a Development Economist*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan) 2002, p. 284.

⁴ Thomas G Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij and Richard Jolly, *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press) 2005.

unemployment in Britain and from whom Hans acknowledged he learnt so much. How many young economists today, having obtained their doctorates from the equivalent of Keynes, would then spend the next two years living with poor unemployed families?

Hans at the UN

Hans joined the UN in 1947 and stayed for 22 years, until 1969. In the UN, he worked for an extraordinarily large number of agencies and organizations – DEA (now DESA), UNICEF, WFP, ADB, ECA, UNRISD, UNIDO, ILO, no doubt others. Hans produced pioneering reports and publications for most of all of them, and often became their “economist of choice”, the one who could be relied upon to produce rapidly and on time, a report with analysis and recommendations they would find practicable and which they could treat as their own. I know from personal experience how UNICEF always treated Hans as their own special economist. I never let on that so also did ILO and WFP- though WFP waited until 2001 before they gave Hans the Food for Life Award!

What was the impact of all these contributions? In the UN Intellectual history, we identified four ways in which ideas can make an impact on development:

- by changing the perception of key issues or situations in development,
- by helping to define an agenda for action,
- by providing the basis for new alliances, which can serve to mobilize action or alter government perceptions of their own interests,
- by becoming institutionalized in some new or existing organization, which helps take the idea forward into action.

By all four tests, Hans made gigantic contributions to the UN, to research and analysis and to development in action.

Perceptions of development. Hans changed the way relationships between richer and poorer countries were perceived in development, from his early work on the long run terms of trade, through his work on technology and employment and, in the 1980s, on the way structural differentials multiply the impact of global recession on children and others in poor families in poor countries. In UNICEF, we termed this the reverse shock-absorber effect!

Note however, that the point Hans made about the *distribution* of gains between investing and borrowing countries, the title of his original article, has been much less emphasised, even to this day. But, as I will elaborate later, Hans also had a major impact on perceptions and thinking about development through much of his other work on international aid, employment, science and technology, redistribution with growth.

Defining agendas for action. The many contributions Hans made in defining agendas for action are too numerous to list. Almost everything he wrote was directed to action, not just to clarify a theoretical point or rebut an argument for its own sake. This was true of his first major contribution, *Men Without Work*, of almost all of his work in the UN and of much of his work later at the IDS. It was true of one of his last books, *The North South Divide*, published in 2001, 63 years after his first!

As a contributor to policy, Hans’s gentle style could be deceptive. I remember an argument with the chief economist of DfID in the 1970s, when Hans was pressing for more positive UK support for the Common Fund. “We are not convinced that commodity agreements

would always help or even are feasible”, said the man from DfID “and even if the Fund is created, we don’t think anyone would want to borrow from it.” “In which case”, countered Hans, without a pause, “you could offer some UK finance, without any fear of being required to pay”.

Building alliances for change. Hans was an indefatigable mobilizer and supporter of NGOs, especially those committed to development and to the UN. SID, UNA-UK, and the UNICEF national committee of the UK –though for UNICEF in UK, it was Ilse who took the lead, for many years holding the record for annual sales of UNICEF greeting cards. In all these areas, Hans was endlessly creative in framing causes for support in writing articles and in showing how different groups, large or small, could provide the support needed to turn ideas into action.

Helping and set the policy of key international institutions. It was probably during his 22 years with the UN, from 1947 to 1969, that Hans made his biggest and most lasting contributions. He worked for the DEA, where he prepared the first paper on long term trends in the terms of trade, wrote a seminal paper for UNICEF on children and economic development (for which he set aside for several months, his paper on trade!) served as secretary to the SUNFED committee, which gave rise to IDA in the World Bank and the Special Fund in the UN, which in the mid-1960s was merged with EPTA to become UNDP.

By 1960, he was the UN economist who helped to map out the vision and give professional content to many of the new UN institutions. After President Kennedy had proposed the idea of a development decade in 1961, it was Hans who drafted the Blue Book which integrated the various elements submitted by the different parts of the UN into “Proposals for Action”. For those inclined to dismiss the Development Decade as all growth and nothing else, it is salutary to recall that in its foreword, no doubt drafted by Hans, the SG stated unambiguously that “development is not just economic growth, it is growth plus change.”⁵ Hans in the main text spelt out many of these elements of change, including emphasising that each country needed to set its own targets.

Over the 1960s, Hans worked with many of the new UN institutions to give detail and content to this vision and the goals. Thus he played a major part in the establishing WFP and in explaining how food aid could be used by the proposed new institution. Hans saw the value of using the potential of food surpluses to make up for shortages of financial aid, and how, in doing this, damaging side effects on food production in developing countries could be avoided. In parallel Hans was assisting the newly founded African Development Bank, to define its role and priorities for lending. In 1963, when he was at ECA in Addis Ababa – and I as a graduate student was sharing a house with him on the Jimma Road - he took time out to prepare a paper for a UNICEF meeting in Bellagio to explore how UNICEF could get issues of children into development planning rather than simply support projects for children. He even persuaded me to write a paper too, my first for UNICEF! Incidentally, this meeting was attended by Jan Tinbergen, Alfred Sauvy and VKRV Rao.

Then in the 1960s, there was UNIDO, for which Hans served as director of the Economic Policy Division and did much of the conceptual thinking on the role and organization of the specialized agency when it was first established. He had earlier helped UNRISD, for which he served as first associate director in 1964 and played an active part in setting up the Institute’s initial philosophy, plans and work programme.

⁵ UN, *The UN Development Decade: proposals for action*, (New York, UN) p. v.

Hans at IDS

Hans retired – I use the word strictly in its formal bureaucratic sense - to the newly founded IDS in 1969. He continued at IDS for 37 years, during which time, we celebrated other landmarks of his retirement – when he reached 65, ten years later for a mid career celebration when he reached 75, another one when he reached 85 and one last November, for Hans's 95th. Five days before his 95th birthday, he had given what turned out to be his final lecture to IDS graduate students, on the origins of the 0.7 aid target. Hans needed no notes. He knew the topic only too well – and his own role in it. But this did not stop him writing – and an unfinished article, in meticulously neat handwriting, was found in his room.

In fact, with his good memory, Hans used to tell me that our involvements with the IDS, mine as well as his, had begun even before the IDS was founded. We had apparently both several times discussed ideas for such an institution with Dudley when all three of us had been in Addis Ababa in 1963 - no doubt meetings full of deep significance for the future of IDS of which I have absolutely no recollection. Perhaps when I get older, I will begin to remember!

Hans's period at IDS was one of prodigious productivity, though prodigious is something of an understatement! Since most of his writing during his UN days had been without attribution, the bulk of his named publications came from after his retirement, between aged 59 and 95. Throughout this succession of retirements, birthdays and celebrations, Hans had continued at full speed. Full speed is also an under-estimate. John Shaw's biography lists Hans's production from 1970 as 97 books and reports, 61 reports for the UN and 176 articles. This of course, misses out all the reviews, letters to editors in the Times and the Guardian and the wide correspondence Hans maintained with many of us in the UN and outside, drawing out attention to publications or events which he thought important to our work – which they were! – and which we might have missed – which almost always we had! All this and an output of well over 300 formal items!

At IDS, Hans had full rein to display his liking for whimsical comments and gentle puns. On the door of his office in IDS, was a notice board of newspaper clippings, each with a headline of appropriate innuendo. Some of these played on the Singer sewing machine company in its failing days, as "Why Singer was put up for sale", "Singer suitors lined up", "Singer handed over for knockdown price", "Singer ready for a sparkling encore" and one advertisement which Hans especially liked, "Singer - don't deny yourself the pleasure". More often the double entendres came from more racy stories about some pop or opera star: "Not much song, lots of acting", "Singer on affray charge", "Singer's playful sensuality hides the pain", and "Singer hits a high note".

In summary, let me comment on three particular areas of his work where Hans made a permanent mark on development thinking: the ILO employment mission to Kenya, his revisiting of the terms of trade and his work on the UN and UN reform.

The ILO Employment Mission to Kenya with its report, *Employment Incomes and Equality* made a big impact on development thinking in the 1970s and was much cited in the literature. In large part this was because of three pioneering elements in the report:

- 1) its focus on the informal sector, the first time it was recognized in an international report and only months after Keith Hart had reported his original work on the informal sector in Ghana;⁶

⁶ Keith Hart had made a presentation on "Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana" in IDS in September 1971 at a conference co-organized by Rita Cruise O'Brien and myself on urban employment in Africa.

- 2) the focus on poverty as the critical problem underlying employment issues and strategy to reduce poverty as the priority issue for development policy;
- 3) the strategy of redistribution with growth, the special contribution of Hans Singer as the integrating theme for the whole report.

In spite of some scepticism about missions, the Kenya report could never be dismissed as a document which simply gathered dust on some shelf. Some 20,000 copies of the report were sold or distributed, many within Kenya, where it stirred lively debate. Within a year or so, the Kenya Government had published a “sessional white paper” setting out how it proposed to follow up the report’s recommendations. And the report received much attention internationally, including in the academic and research world.

The report was also noticed in the World Bank and had a direct impact on the thinking and work of Hollis Chenery, then Vice President, and on Robert McNamara, then President. McNamara’s major speech on poverty reduction, given at the Bank’s annual meeting in 1973, a year or so after the publication of the Kenya Report, stands, in the words of the World Bank’s historians, “as the greatest articulation of his pro-poor teaching...”⁷

But it was redistribution with growth which many identify as its most creative contribution – and this is clearly due to Hans himself. Indeed, I remember some way through the mission, discussions one evening among several of us as to what could be the integrating theme of the report. Hans arrived and spelt out the elements of a dynamic strategy, in which over time, the annual increments of growth would be allocated disproportionately to the poorest groups. This would make possible expanding resources for investment and production to meet minimum household income targets for the rural and urban populations along with more specific targets for nutrition, access to water, health and basic education. The resources would come from temporarily stabilizing the real incomes of the receivers of the top 10 per cent of incomes – hence, not transfers from the rich but redistribution *from* growth, from the incomes which might otherwise accrue to the rich.

This approach was later generalized in an IDS-World Bank study, published as a World Bank-IDS book, *Redistribution with Growth*. It was one of the few times when the Bank explicitly focused on issues of income distribution and redistribution – until the path breaking WDR 2006, *Equity and Development*.

Hans at IDS revisited the Prebisch-Singer thesis and issues of the terms of trade on several occasions, as did many others. In his later writing, Hans put more emphasis on relations between types of countries rather than types of commodities and put more emphasis on technological power as the roots of imbalance between the poorer and richer countries in the contemporary world. As Shaw comments⁸, Hans no longer saw industrialization as “the great saviour”. As he acknowledged, Hans had not foreseen in his 1949 article that “even national industrialization specifically geared to the home market could become the basis of a continuing and self-reinforcing relationship of dependency.” The two critical factors he had missed included the characteristics of a dominant technology based on an “R & D monopoly” in the investing countries and “the structure of centralized decision making” in the multinational corporations.

The date is significant since 1973 has sometimes been cited as the date for Keith’s first publication on the informal sector.

⁷ Devesh Kapur, John P. Lewis, Richard Webb, *The World Bank: Its First Half Century, Volume 1: History*, (Brookings Institute, Washington) 1997, p 412.

⁸ Shaw, *Sir Hans Singer: The Life and Work of a Development Economist*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan) 2002 p59. I have relied heavily on Shaw’s excellent exposition of the evolution of Hans’s thinking in this area.

Hans recognized that the salvation of the developing countries lay not in industrialization based on the technology of the advanced countries but in the Schumpeterian vision of “technological leadership.” The target must be to bring the objectives of R & D expenditure into line with the distribution of the world’s population.” If that was achieved, “the uneven distribution of gains from trade and investment will begin to look after itself.”

This view of the central importance of science and technology underlay much of Hans’s efforts in this area, including his emphasis on the Sussex Manifesto on Science and Technology as one of his more important publications. It also led to his continuing view that that the UN had failed –and still fails - to take sufficient action in this area.

Many others have revisited the Prebisch Singer thesis over the more than half a century since it was first put forward. Let me end with two comments, emerging from recent work. First, after many years of debate, the balance of professional opinion sides in support of the Prebisch-Singer thesis, that there has been a long term tendency for the net barter terms of trade to move against producers of primary products. Secondly, as John and Richard Toye have shown, the evidence suggests that Hans was the first to identify the trend; Prebisch rapidly saw its significance and promoted it. Strictly speaking, therefore, it should be the Singer-Prebisch thesis – though even to the end, Hans maintained that first authorship was irrelevant. What mattered was the action to which it should have lead – most of which was still required.

As the third topic which pre-occupied Hans, let me turn to the UN, to which he remained fervently loyal and committed and about on which he continued to write. Today, I am sure Hans would prefer to refer to “strengthening the UN” rather than merely to “reform” – and on strengthening he had many ideas which were both creative and pragmatic, with a good dose of political realism. I remember a meeting in 1993 when almost all of us were arguing strongly in favour of an economic and social security council. Hans warned against putting all our eggs in this basket. Better, he suggested, broaden the work of the existing Security Council – which, to some extent, is what has happened. HIV/AIDS, the protection of women in conflict, Africa are all issues which have now been taken to the Council.

The UN Intellectual History Project has documented the many occasions over the last 60 years when the UN was ahead of the curve – and ahead of the Bretton Woods Institutions. Hans often said that we should refer less to the Washington Consensus and more to what he christened as “the New York Dissent”. The UN was ahead of the Bank and the IMF with many ideas and proposals, though often this was only acknowledged years later – as with SUNFED, recognition of the special needs of least developed countries, employment and redistribution, basic needs, debt relief, adjustment with a human face, the vital need for institutional reform in countries in transition. Hans played a bit part in many of these intellectual initiatives. But there were many others, including the ten Nobel laureates in economics who at one time or another worked in or closely with the UN.

Hans argued that there never would be a proper balance between the UN and the Bretton Woods Institutions while the voting structures remained so different. And he argued the case for the UN structure to be changed to give more weight to population and GNP while that of the Bretton Woods Institutions should give more to population. This is perhaps one of Hans forward looking proposals whose time has yet to come.

Richard Jolly

Epilogue

Hans was truly a giant – though a gentle one - who made his impact by clear analysis, endless creativity, outgoing friendship, unqualified willingness to help – all delivered over a life time of writing in books, articles, reports and lectures and by personal interaction through letter, lectures and discussions. No one was too lofty or too lowly for Hans not to find time to discuss some issue of development with them. It is typical – and wonderful – that Hans in his last week met with 2 or 3 IDS students over dinner with Michael Lipton and Emanuel de Kadt and had a meal with Odile, his daughter in law, on the evening before he died in the night. At that point, the gentle giant, after seven decades of pioneering contributions, slipped quietly away in his sleep.