

# *Glimpses*



*Glimpses of Life in the service  
of the United Nations.*

**AN AFICS-MAURITIUS PUBLICATION**

**First Edition: December 2025.**

*Glimpses of life in the service of  
the United Nations.*



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**Project launched in 2015. First Edition, online, published in December 2025.**

**Also published as a contribution to the celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the federation of associations of retired UN staff, FAFICS (1975-2025)**

## ***Second edition planned for 2026.***

*Having read this first Electronic Edition, we invite you or any member of your Association to participate in the second Edition, planned for December 2026.*

*Write and send us your PERSONAL Experience/your Story/your Glimpse, which should be about 1000 words (800-1500 words), in English. Please type in New Times Roman and send to the Editor by email to [mklatchia@intnet.mu](mailto:mklatchia@intnet.mu)*

*Your contribution will be published in the second ONLINE EDITION, in 2026. Also send a picture of self or an action photo.*

*Thank you.*

*Michael Atchia*

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## **Foreword to the publication**

**1. Following the time-honored tradition of writing about one's past experiences; we are happy to present this new compilation of memorable experiences from a few former UN staff members from all over the world and all agencies.**

2. This Project aims to be a Forum for past members to express themselves and share with others their personal experiences which may be interesting to read, and which may be an inspiration to others.

3. It may also contribute to making the United Nations and its Charter better known and the importance of its work appreciated,

4. Former staff members were invited to choose a true experience from their rich and varied career at the UN and write about it and many have responded positively.

We invite the reader to join us in this journey of - not just remembrance- but equally a reflection of those man and women who have devoted their lives at the service of an ideal, that of the spirit of the UN Charter, for more peace more co-existence and through various technical and other means real progress in achieving sustainable development.

If successful, a second edition with new inputs is envisaged!

***Michael ATCHIA /Marlene LAYS/Miranda PATEL .....(Editors***

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TEXTS : *IN SERVICE, ON ASSIGNMENT OR IN SERVICE, IN THE OFFICE....*

*“It makes me proud that I have spent 30 out of the 70 years of my life serving this organization. I'm sure you do too”.*  
*Rodney Phillips (UNICEF).*

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## **Working for the UN: some glimpses**

### **Philippe Hein**

*Staff member of UNCTAD between 1980 to 2000, with periods of secondment to other UN-related bodies; subsequently, consultant for various international agencies. Appointed by the Secretary- General to the UN Committee for Development Policy, where he served as rapporteur from 2006 to 2012.*

### **Policies to encourage growth, employment and poverty alleviation**

My principal area of focus was on socio-economic policies, and in particular to promote the use of trade as an engine for growth, employment and poverty reduction. The main emphasis was on the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

Based on my prior experience in the business sector [Mauritius Employers Federation, and subsequently as Executive Director of the Rogers group], I could refer to the Mauritius “success story”, which I could claim to know first-hand in some detail. This gave me confidence to give credible and practical advice to the more than 30 developing countries I visited on technical missions. At the same time, I was able to contribute to discussions with many more brilliant economists or very senior UN, IMF and World Bank administrators, or Ministers, in private or in public, orally or by contributing to numerous reports or position papers.

One specific area where the performance of Mauritius has been exceptional, contradicting all earlier predictions, concerns employment creation. At a time of a rapidly increasing labour force, including through increased participation of women, unemployment fell from an estimated 20% in the late 1960s to 2% twenty –five years later. To the point that, in the 1990’s, labour shortages started to appear.

In this regard, the Export processing Zone (EPZ), established in 1970, had many lessons which other countries and development specialists were eager to learn from. Among them was the innovation that a Free Zone need not be a geographical zone, but a status attributed to an enterprise which could locate anywhere. More controversial was the implication that, in order to encourage employment, the levels of wages and salaries, as well as non-wage costs to

employers, might need to be set at a relatively low level in the first instance. This was often regarded as an anti-social recommendation, which allows to “exploit workers”. Yet, I could point out that a key point in the Mauritius success was that, in parallel with keeping labour costs low, and as an indispensable counterpart, Mauritius pursued a comprehensive social welfare policy. Government, to compensate for these relatively modest remuneration levels, and to enable the least paid workers and their families to meet their minimum basic needs, provided numerous welfare benefits, including free health and education services, non-contributory old age pensions, widows and the disabled benefits; later, free bus transport for the elderly and school children. There were also subsidies for several basic foodstuffs: rice, flour, sugar, as well as low-cost subsidized housing. These “welfare state” benefits were financed by direct taxes on the more affluent persons, and on businesses (including the export tax on sugar), and by indirect taxes, which were- and remain- high on items like alcohol, tobacco, gambling and luxury cars.

The important general point here is that, in situations of very high unemployment, a low-wage policy may, regrettably, be necessary -at least in the first stage. For instance, in Mauritius, if relatively high minimum wages had been set, and social benefits charged directly to the payroll of employers (as is done in many countries), it is unlikely that the EPZ would have taken off at all; and employers in all sectors would have been encouraged to prematurely use labour-saving devices. But the Mauritius way showed that it is possible, fair and politically acceptable to justify a low wage policy combining it with public compensatory social measures. As it happened, labour shortages were soon to appear, incomes rose rapidly as employers were competing with each other by offering higher wages-and by 1990 Mauritius had to hire foreign workers in sizable numbers - a practice which has continued since.

There were many other lessons in economic policy which I was able to share, applicable to many countries. For instance, that is possible under a democratic Government, to implement progressive policies of social equity and affirmative action to correct injustices in the past, while avoiding nationalization or confiscatory taxation.

### **A misunderstanding**

On the lighter side, I recall a rather bizarre misunderstanding. At some point, I was informed that the UN Chief of Personnel from New York was visiting

Geneva and wanted to meet me. I was impressed that such a high official had even heard of me (a P.5 at the time) and hopefully surmised that this was a sign that my great qualities were at last being recognized by senior management, and that I was about to be appointed to some elevated position. My hopes were confirmed by the Chief's opening statement to the effect that my good reputation had come to his ears and I was one of the few he could trust to help him deal with a particularly delicate matter.

However, the conversation soon took a different turn. He regretted informing me in confidence that a staff member-one of my compatriots-had repeatedly been behaving in a most inappropriate manner. This person had often been warned, in vain. Matters had reached the point that the UN was considering reluctantly- dismissing this recalcitrant. However, before resorting to this extreme measure, he was requesting me to talk to this compatriot, giving him a last chance to desist from his deplorable behaviour. Sure, I replied, I can always try.

He then gave me the name of the culprit, which was sounded something like "Azziz Ould Tayah" (or possibly "Abdel Ould Sidi Yaya"?). I immediately noticed that it was most unlikely that I could help. Not only did I did not know this "compatriot", but his name sounded very typical of someone from Maurita. My interlocutor was taken aback and ended the conversation rather abruptly by profusely apologizing for confusing "Mauritian" with "Mauritanian". I had to wait five more years for my promotion.

*Philippe Hein ([philhein@orange.fr](mailto:philhein@orange.fr))*

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## **My gratitude to the UNECA**

**Prof. Soodursun Jugessur**

*Staff member of UN's Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), he was based in Addis Abeba, between 1981 to 2000, with periods of secondment to other UN-related bodies.*

January 1981. I was a young staff of the University of Mauritius, busy with my lectures and research on alternative sources of energy and bio-feedback effects of mind control. When, after my application for a post, I received an invitation to attend an interview for the post of Chief of the Science and Technology Unit at the UNECA, in Addis Ababa, I had no idea as to what awaited me. There, in front of a big ten-member panel up on the rostrum, chaired by the Executive Secretary of the ECA, Professor Adebayo Adedeji, brimming with self-confidence, I answered all their questions as best I could. After an interview that lasted for over an hour, I met some staff of the ECA who briefed me about the place and the work, as they heard I was the best! But it took one and a half year before I got a cable requesting me to join work. I am grateful to the panel for having chosen me.

Addis Ababa is a naturally air-conditioned city located in a high plateau. My work there involved leading a small group in developing programs and planning, advising governments on their Science and Technology policies, and organizing the meetings of the continental Intergovernmental Committee on Science and Technology and its working groups in carrying their own sub-regional programs. It was challenging and exciting to see them review their own national and sub-regional policies and programs, shifting from the old concept of looking at Science and Technology as purely academic research with little development, to the application of off-the-shelf available scientific knowledge and technology transfer to expedite their socio-economic development. AS Chief of Section I had to oversee the work of two other institutions created by our organization in collaboration with the OAU, namely the African Regional Center for Science and Technology (ARCT) in Dakar, and the African Regional Industrial Property Organization (ARIPO) along with the Industry Division of ECA. Here I must pay my respects to the farsightedness of the then President of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, who even created the Presidential Forum for Science and Technology in Africa, and Professor Odhiambo of the ICTP in Nairobi.

Unfortunately, some vested-interest groups were reluctant to chip in money to see the continent become autonomous through endogenous capacity building. I remember spending sleepless nights trying to convince some member-state representatives who were in the good books of some such institutions. Since I had the opportunity to interact with Ministers and top officials, our efforts were eventually rewarded to some extent. But as others wanted it, the entire Science and Technology Unit that had been upgraded to a Section was eventually disbanded in the name of Food Security and Sustainable development! Even the UN Center for Science and Technology for Development, UNCSTD, based in New York, was disbanded! After many years the Science and Technology program was reinserted but had less support financially. Even then I am grateful for the occasion I had been given to do whatever possible under those trying times, and to have used my expertise to drive the programs.

The event we awaited eagerly was the Intergovernmental meeting of the UN General Assembly that looked at global programs and approved our regional budgets, usually held in New York or Geneva. They were occasions to establish contacts with colleagues working in different parts of the world. In the fifteenth year of my career at the UNECA, I was transferred to work for and eventually take charge of the sub-regional office for economic development in North Africa, the SRDC, in Tangier, Morocco. After all these years in Addis Ababa, this was a very welcome change, and I thoroughly enjoyed the last three years of my career before my retirement in 2000. From my room I could see the rock of Gibraltar in Spain on the other side of the Mediterranean. Often, we just took the ferry to reach Spain in less than an hour and enjoy the beauty of this country. After the years in Addis Ababa where we were all the time in a militarily occupied country, this was an opportunity to breathe the freedom of the North. Tangier and the surroundings are so beautiful with the seacoast and the Atlas Mountains. While in Ethiopia we enjoyed an even, cool weather, throughout the year, here we had differences of hot summer and cold winter, and even snow at times! Travelling to the west towards USA and Canada is comparatively easy.

As a socially committed person, I also served as the President of the UNECA Staff Association, a trade union, and represented the staff at the highest levels while presenting their demands for better conditions of service. This was before I left for Morocco.

My greatest gratitude to the UN has been the financial independence I acquired as a result of having been an International Civil servant! Medical insurance and the fairly reasonable pension as a retiree are essential for our life. I am very thankful for having been able to serve the international institution.

The only suggestion I would make is to see a real mindset change amidst the main contributors and the government representatives who decide at the highest level. As inhabitants of a small planet earth, we share a common destiny. The spirit of sharing and selfless charity should be our objective so that we all work for a better environment, physical and spiritual. What we have seen over the years, with ruthless exploitation of resources, has left a real scar on our planet! And overall, we cannot be proud of the consumerist and materialist trends we have promoted in the spirit of economic growth. Generations to come will blame us for this! The UN is well placed to make this change!

*Prof. Soodursun Jugessur ( 'Hitu Jugessur' hitu@artofliving.org)*

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## **THE ELEPHANT'S FLY**

**Guadalupe Espinosa**

*Guadalupe Espinosa-González retired from service in 2002 and is now an active member of AFPNU (Asociación de Funcionarios Pensionados de las Naciones Unidas en México), the Mexican branch of FAFICS.*

In 1986 for me, a new UN Statistical Office staff member, organizing a work mission from New York to Equatorial Guinea in Central Africa was no easy task. When I asked my supervisor what I needed to prepare for this trip he said: "For authorization of your mission-travel you need to walk the papers "(??;i). "What?" I said, and he replied .... "It means you have to get approval from the different authorities until you have the authorization and related funds; for me you just need to write the proposal based on the country 's request." For two or three days I 'walked the papers' at various levels of authority and responsibilities. Needless to say, one of the main difficulties I faced was

guessing what the many acronyms meant that were used in offices or departments involved in mission-travel authorizations. Because only acronyms were used, no responsible staff members told me anything specific. Feeling quite stressed, I simply took note of each acronym and guessed its meaning. “The first step is a TR that you need to send to EO or TC, after which you pass it to CDO where it is cleared and sent to TU until you get your TA”. Finally, feeling dizzy after trying to absorb the alphabet soup, I got my TA and went to JFK to fly to Malabo, Equatorial Guinea’s capital city, via Madrid with a stop in Lagos, Nigeria.

The burden of responsibility for my first mission, the tedious ‘walker of papers’ role, the transatlantic journey and the eight-hour stopover at Madrid’s airport, were just the right combination of exhaustion and anxiety for me, sitting on a comfortable chair in the waiting area, to fall into a deep sleep. At midnight I suddenly woke up when someone asked me if I was booked on the Lagos/Malabo flight. I thanked her and immediately boarded the plane. When making room for my briefcase and portable computer (then still quite bulky) I realized I didn’t have my handbag. I told the flight attendant my DSA, UN passport and malaria pills were in it and asked her to let me out to look for it. She said “NO, because we have already received the captain’s close doors order”. I said in that case I could not travel and she replied: “You know what that means? We’d have to remove your luggage and cause at least a one-hour delay”. I replied “Sorry, but I can’t travel without my passport”. Just then the captain appeared; when told what the fuss was about, he called airport personnel to take me to pick up my handbag that was anxiously waiting for me in the seat where we had both slept. Back on the plane it was quite clear that the flight attendant was very unhappy.

Although the plane was full, I could relax during the flight to Lagos where I was surprised when almost all the passengers got off with just a few continuing to Malabo. The only person joining us was a Spanish businessman who sat in the seat beside mine. After telling me he often travelled to Malabo he quickly fell asleep. Meanwhile, the weather changed abruptly, and we experienced strong turbulence; the lightning was so strong that inside the plane it was bright as day although we could see the storm raging outside making me, and no doubt most of the other passengers, feel scared. However, the businessman was not bothered and seemed to be happily enjoying his dreams while I was energetically clutching the arms of my seat. About four o’clock in the morning

the pilot told us there was a landing problem because of the bad weather. His many unsuccessful approaches to Malabo meant we would be flying to Cameroon to wait there until Malabo's conditions improved. We landed in Cameroon where what seemed to be, but were not, violent ocean waves hitting the plane so hard that the Spaniard woke up. When the plane landed the authorities came aboard and the Spaniard told me the airline had no landing agreement with the airport but that, after some non-official dealings, we would be allowed to depart.

After three hours of back and forth with the authorities, we departed still with the same rough weather. I tried to relax by looking at my Spanish neighbour who, once again, had quickly fallen fast asleep. In the other seats on our row I saw someone (a man/woman?) totally covered with the blankets they gave us. When the lightning and turbulence worsened, more blankets were wrapped around his/her body. Finally, we heard attempts being made to lower the landing gear, but we continued to circle for more than twenty minutes. Suddenly the pilot was telling us "We are trying to land at Malabo's airport, but it is difficult because we have no clear view; our insurance covers a limited number of flying hours and we will reach that limit within fifteen minutes and if we cannot land we go back to Madrid" I thought: "OMG .... What are you doing here? Is this what UN jobs entail? You had a cozy job at your national statistical office where your greatest challenge was convincing people to answer questionnaires, rent boats for data collectors during seasonal floods, persuade/compel local authorities, etc."

A small green patch eventually appeared in the cloudy sky and the pilot landed on Malabo's small airport's runway ..... and I thanked God. On seeing many people at the airport, I assumed they were expecting us to be rescued, having heard of our many landing attempts.

The Malabo project's Peruvian expert warmly welcomed me and introduced me to the National Planning Minister who was on the same plane. I told him about our difficult flight. The Minister replied: "Noooo.....the pilot is a coward!! We should have landed at the first attempt; everything was O.K. but he was scared". I thanked God we had a 'coward' in charge. The Peruvian, after exchanging a few words, asked me about the mission's other expert. I replied: "I have no idea; nobody told me there was anyone else". He said he expected someone from Brussels about which I knew nothing. Suddenly I heard: "Look... the last passenger is coming out". It was the person (a man) wrapped in the blankets

who claimed he was the ‘other expert’ and said “Where are we? I’m sick and terrified. After being taken to the UN compound we decided to start working the next day.

We began with a meeting between the authorities and the project’s experts. At the National Statistical Office I felt completely at home since, all over the world, work in statistical offices is very similar. Projects are collective and no individual acknowledgements are expected but problem-solving relationships are developed. I was relaxed and ready to make field visits to check the data sources used to compile national accounts. I felt so comfortable that when we had to verify fishery activity figures, I went alone to visit fishery areas around Malabo. A few teenagers I met offered to take me to the places I needed to visit and I thankfully accepted their offer.

We passed by what was unmistakably a fisherman’s family home – nets, small boat, paddles and so on in the yard – and I talked to the woman standing at the entrance. As there are no records of women’s fishery participation, there were no statistics showing their contribution to this economic activity, so I asked her to tell me about it. She was agreeable and talkative and, first, showed me her newborn baby boy. She then described the different types of women’s fisheries work. They do not go to sea, but they repair nets, help to carry fish loads from the boat to the house and to the market; and also clean the fish and seafood to make them ready for the market; these are not considered ‘economic’ activities but simply part of household chores.

I was gripped by her account, but she suddenly stopped talking and called to another woman inside the house: “Please take the baby because they said someone saw the elephants fly.” I was flabbergasted and thought that was something I had to see: I said. “I’ve never heard of that, it’s incredible”. I was totally let down when she said “Yes, it’s a revolting big fly that bites people, animals and even elephants, so I don’t want it near my baby boy.” I then realized she said ‘elephant’s (with an apostrophe) fly’ that was probably one of the many forest legends, instead of what I thought was ‘elephants fly’. Disappointed that I would not be seeing a pachyderm with wings, I tried to continue our fruitful conversation but, as she was still uneasy about the elephant’s fly, I suggested we meet the following day and, now more relaxed, she agreed.

I immediately realized my ‘official guides’ had left, and I asked her where they were. She told me: “Somebody caught the elephant’s fly, and they went to see it. They are all gathered around the phone office.” I followed her instructions and found a group of youngsters -- mainly teenagers – with my ‘official guides’ among them one of whom called to me: “Come and see the elephant’s fly.” I carefully approached the group and saw the disgusting beetle lying (fortunately) dead but still fresh enough to appreciate its colours and size and the features Nature provided for an insect’s survival in the middle of the forest needed blood from animals with skins as hard, thick and dense skins as an elephant’s.

On the following days, still impressed by the encounter with this huge insect, I continued working while believing the elephant’s fly was buzzing in the air around me. However, when my ‘mission’ ended I made an assessment. The first question I asked myself was: What other institutions can make papers walk? Where do you get together with committed people from different countries/cultures all working to advance a country’s capacities without expecting personal credit or recognition? Where else do you face and overcome unusual difficulties while enriching your working life’s experience? How, if you are not an Equatorial Guinea native, do you react when you experience a close encounter with a recently caught elephant’s fly? After almost twenty years with the UN, and despite the continuous walking of papers, I believe no other work environment anywhere in the world would allow me to participate in these collective efforts to promote a country’s development.

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## **“Remembering the United Nations”: The Unforgettable Nostalgia!**

**George Abu-Jawdeh**

*George is a former UNDP Representative and United Nations Resident Coordinator. At the time of writing he was currently President of the Association of Former International Civil Servants in Lebanon (AFICS-Lebanon), in Beirut.*

When I look back at my long career in the United Nations (over 30 years), I feel proud of the great achievements realized in the service of humanity in the search for peace and sustainable development. I have served the UN in a great number of countries (more than a dozen) all over the Globe (Africa, Latin America, Europe, the Arab world including my native country Lebanon) and my career culminated in reaching the most senior level in the field as the UNDP Resident Representative and United Nations Resident Coordinator representing the United Nations Secretary-General in those countries.

Although I achieved very successful missions in several countries, I have chosen to write for the forthcoming FAFICS publication on my experience in Iraq which I consider the most successful and rewarding in my long career.

It was in 1983 that I was offered an appointed as the United Nations Development Programme Resident Representative and UN Resident Coordinator in Iraq where I had served successfully as Acting UNDP ResRep for two years (1972-74).

The main reason for this choice was that the Iraqi Counterpart, i.e. the Iraqi Government was well aware of the importance and value of the UN cooperation, in the implementation of its development strategies and programmes. Moreover, they had the policy and technical level to make good use of it for their social and economic development. This in itself is very rewarding for the UN in that the cooperation is well received and appreciated. In this respect, I wish to underline the fact that I was granted by the official authorities an enviable distinction among the Chiefs of diplomatic missions of around 65 countries accredited to Iraq. Moreover, I had the privilege of being received by the then Prime Minister (Photo) once a week for consultations and follow-up on our joint projects and activities. Another privilege was granted to me was the freedom to enter and circulate in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs without being escorted by a protocol diplomat as required from all other Chiefs of Mission accredited to Iraq.

In a nutshell, the highlights of the responsibilities of a UNDP Resident Representative and UN Resident Coordinator in Iraq were:

He headed the UN Development Mission in that country which involved, inter, alia high level contacts with the Iraqi Government on programme policy issues, security matters, and coordination with Ambassadors and heads of diplomatic missions accredited to Iraq. Our office had around 50 officials

responsible for programme matters, administration, finance, general services, etc. The magnitude of the programme included over 100 experts working in various Ministries and Government institutions covering such major sectors as economic planning, engineering industries, and transfer of technology, tourism development, airport construction and operations, vocational training, manpower training, etc. The post required a very high level of managerial capacity and qualifications in economic and social development.

The mission in Iraq extended until the end of 1988 when I was transferred to Lebanon in the same capacity. Anyway, the assignment was basically of the same nature as the one in Iraq described earlier with particular emphasis on emergency assistance and acute security problems in a war-stricken country.

In conclusion, I wish to make three important general observations:

- 1) I was lucky and happy that I had made the choice to join the United Nations Development Programme which was the largest multilateral development agency in the world that was concerned with social and economic development of all the developing countries. Its assistance to these countries was crucial and timely,
- 2) When I look back at my achievements in the various countries to which I had been accredited, I feel proud that I was able to aid peoples in need and to cultivate in those developing countries the principles of social, and economic justice in this world,
- 3) However, I regret to see nowadays a reversal of the trend towards development and a sporadic wave of atrocities and violence spreading all over the world unfortunately signaling, probably, the beginning of the Third World War. This destructive trend coupled with an unprecedented increase and horrifying spreading of destructive arms of all kinds all over the world, and especially the developing countries, is tantamount to a downward development current leading to destruction and loss of lives and opportunities for any improvement in the foreseeable future.

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## **Bearing witness to an international community**

**Nguyen Huu Dong**

*The author, who is from Asia has been involved in UN electoral missions all over the world. Met up with a group of colleagues in New York who worked with him in Central America. He looks back on the work of twenty years with the United Nations.*

Our adventure in the service of peace began a little over twenty years ago in Central America, first in Nicaragua and then in El Salvador. Since then, we have been dispersed throughout the world, pursuing our careers, but bearing with us the knowledge and enthusiasm that came from those days when we discovered together the difficulties and rewards of a vocation that was new to us.

Individually, many of us were promoted to greater responsibilities, while others continued to dedicate themselves to this truly Sisyphean task of trying to instill a slightly greater degree of harmony in the world, with no other ambition than that of being worthy of the trust vested in us by the institution. These twenty years have helped us to understand, in our hearts and in our minds, what the United Nations means—less an organization than an ideal. And in contrast to the Sisyphus of Camus, we could hardly congratulate ourselves on this work that always had to be restarted over and over again. But never mind the incessant movement of waves across the beach. The flecks of foam they leave are evidence of our having been there.

As for us, what testament can we give? What have we learned in these years of apprenticeship: apprenticeship to a trade, to friendship, solidarity and partnership? In this jungle of feelings and new experiences, each of us has ploughed his own furrow different from any other. But if this text has a meaning, it is to remind us, from a very personal perspective, what was the common crucible in which we were revealed to ourselves, a revelation which allowed us to take on new missions with apprehension, but also in the conviction that we were up to them, and to approach them with humility and simplicity.

Nicaragua was the first adventure. It grouped around two men a team of international civil servants (which we all were) endowed with a mandate that was as simple as it was vague: observe the elections that were intended to end a decade of conflict that had torn that country apart. I asked the personnel officer who had suggested that I join the mission what this mandate meant. “What do I know?” he answered. And on this laconic response I headed for Nicaragua. In a local building that served as a temporary office, we observation coordinators spent the first long week asking ourselves what our work was and then began attending presentations by the national authorities on how the elections would be organized.

The first thing we learned was to be patient and humble, since many of us had never even voted in an election, let alone observed one. We therefore learned the rudiments of the job of electoral administrator. We also learned, as much from books as from our discussions with our local interlocutors, the possible symbolic (and therefore political) effect of the presence of representatives from an organization like the United Nations in a sovereign and independent country. Few knew what was expected of us, especially those who were in charge of running the country. We were greeted at public meetings with either curiosity or indifference.

To be present was what was important—a visible but discreet presence. Sometimes, the participants at these meetings approached us shyly to entrust us with their fears or their hopes. We became, over the duration of the mission, the confidants of humble people who spoke for the first time in their lives with the strangers that we were. And we were able to make them understand that we were neither enemies nor givers of lessons. We listened to them always with respect and we were transformed by the spontaneous trust which they accorded us. We were not passively neutral because we knew enough to condemn actions that were illegal according to the laws of the country, just as we affirmed and promoted the most fundamental values of the international community.

But we were impartial relative to the local figures and groups, favouring neither one faction or another. We understood the points of view of all sides without taking sides, and without ever forgetting that we were guests, and therefore subject to elementary rules of courtesy. Of course, we were physically and

socially different from our local interlocutors. Our cars, our offices, our style of life, as modest as they were, were nonetheless objects of envy for a population that lived at the level of poverty.

If the operation in Nicaragua is now considered as a success, the credit is not ours. It is above all that of the entire population, the government and its supporters as well as the opposition. They all demonstrated, despite the evident sacrifices required, a remarkable sense of responsibility towards the higher interests of the nation. Our contribution, at least so far as I am concerned, was to have understood how to show by our presence and nothing more than our presence (in a more evangelical language: our *witness*) that the international community was first a community (*cum* and *munis*), and that it shared the burdens and the values that moved the population. As I write these lines, I think that we were perhaps the main beneficiaries of the mission because of what we learned there: humility, humanity, but also firmness in defense of essential values, and a determination to fulfill our mandate whatever it cost.

For those who had the luck to participate in the El Salvador mission, the lessons of Nicaragua were of incalculable worth. The situation in El Salvador was more complicated. We arrived in the middle of a civil war with a mandate to first observe the implementation of the human rights agreements, and then, once the peace was signed, observe the implementation of those agreements and, finally, to observe the elections.

This sequence had not been pre-determined. It was defined as the successive mandates were achieved. The code of conduct imposed on us by the head of mission, the same who had guided us in Nicaragua, was to respect the same principles: humility, respect, firmness, and impartiality. To describe as “disgust” our reaction to the overt disrespect for human rights committed by certain factions of the army is an understatement. But here as well we were able to understand – while neither accepting nor justifying – such behaviour, which was itself the result of inextricable contradictions. How does one give up power, with all that it represents in terms of interests or even a way of life? How does one submit to the authority of civilians after having been one’s own master? One officer from this faction confided to me, in a moment of great lucidity, that if he could earn a salary equivalent to mine, he would also become an advocate for human rights.

Whatever their origin, the discussions and opinions that we heard enriched our own thinking as we debated these themes, a debate that continues to shake up the academic community. Should one try to make respect for human rights a universal and abstract policy from which every human being is the beneficiary? Or should we recognize the fact that a human is defined in his being by his links with a national community, with a particular culture, tradition and history? I have no pretensions of entering into this discussion and even less to offer an opinion. What I retain are the main factors that explain why various actors trusted us, whatever their partisan position. They were the attitudes of humility that I have mentioned throughout this note, along with the unwavering desire to implement the mandate that we were given, and intellectual honesty, understood as the capacity to see the different opinions of others.

In 2011, Iqbal Riza, the head of our missions in Nicaragua and el Salvador, was accorded by the Salvadorian parliament the distinction of, ‘Noble Friend of El Salvador]. Among those who signed the decoration’s decree was the country’s vice president between 1992 and 1994, who had opposed the peace accords. Throughout its long history as a mediator between warring factions, the United Nations and its representatives have received many awards. But that an award was given unanimously by a parliament composed of former adversaries united in honouring the contributions of one man is to the best of my knowledge unique. Beyond other considerations, this man knew, with his simplicity, humanity and intelligence, how to transform a conflict into a game with only winners.

A few anecdotes are worth more than a long dissertation. I want to provide two.

We were often invited to dinner at Mr. Riza’s residence. Among the dishes served there was always ham. If anyone asked him about his religion, and what it forbade, he would offer a half smile: it is not because I am the host that I should deprive my guests of their favourite meat.

One day we were in his office, and I was briefing him on the tense situation in the region that I was responsible for. In the middle of my briefing his international line rang. It was a call from Alvaro de Soto in New York describing the latest difficulties in getting the peace accords signed. In the middle of that briefing, his domestic phone rang. It was the cook who was speaking loud enough for me to hear her. “Mr. Riza, the fish you bought is too

big for the oven. The guests are arriving in two hours. Should I cut the head or the tail?" He answered with a composed voice. "Don't worry, Mr. Dong is coming to help you." Then he looked at me. "We'll continue our discussions later. You understand very well that for a cook, her fish is more important than world peace."

Simplicity, humanity, and an ability to understand the interests of each. These qualities explain a lot and teach even more. For a long time, twenty years, I have been guided by this lesson.

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## **A stint as an election observer !**

### **María Luz Díaz-Marta**

*María worked with UNDP in Argentina and Mexico from 1970 to 2003..*

Mexico was going to have presidential elections back in 1944. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) had governed Mexico for two thirds of a century, and a more transparent process was needed.

For the first time, United Nations was invited to attend the elections to observe the whole election process to strengthen confidence in the vote. Millions of dollars were spent on improvements in the 1994 electoral process. Everything promised to be perfect.

The participation of United Nations (through a UNDP Mexico Project in which I participated) referred to hiring NGO to act as observers before, during and after the election day. United Nations and Mexico signed an agreement which had to do with the selection of committed NGO to act as observers, and everything was contemplated to have a successful project. United Nations is always well prepared in all instances and for all type of requests.

First, for the selection of the organizations, the NGO had to present their proposals and a budget to carry out activities.

Then, a dedicated and multi-disciplinary committee decided on which organizations would be selected and project documents were signed with each NGO, who had to provide the documentation and detailed list of activities with detailed budget expenditures.

As usual, and with the approval of United Nations, the requirements went from purchasing electronic equipment to register the data, hiring of staff to do the job, some printing material, travel expenses, training courses, etc.

However, one NGO requested “donkeys” to do electoral observation in some communities, with the argument that it was the only mean to reach the communities. United Nations contemplates the purchase of all transportation equipment but no “donkeys”, and thus the NGO concerned had to change his requirements to adjust to UN procurement manuals.

We could say that United Nations projects are always very successful, but in this case, UN was not really prepared for this type of support... The UN procurement manuals must change to adjust to ALL needs, and the purchase of “donkeys” (as well as the alfalfa and hay that they eat) has to be included in the Procurement manuals for a UN project to be well set up.

*(María Luz Díaz-Marta [mary@diaz-marta.com](mailto:mary@diaz-marta.com))*

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## A UNESCO STORY

### **Rosamaria Durand**

*Rosamaria Durand , a Canadian citizen, joined UNESCO in 1994 and served in Paris, Hanoi, Rabat ( with accreditation to Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia ) and in Brasilia. Retired since 2006, she now lives in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada and continues to strongly believe in the relevance and critical importance of UNESCO in the world.*

"Please sit down, Mrs. Durand." The tone is soft but commanding. A boss for sure, as my secretary would say. And a boss indeed...I am standing in the

vast, beautiful office of Dr Federico Mayor, UNESCO Director General. It is August 1999 and I am about to be appointed as the very first UNESCO representative and Head of the new Office in Viet Nam.

While the DG is signing some papers, I take the opportunity to look around me at the many exquisite pieces of art that the delegations of our Member States bring to Paris in homage to our Organization and at the tall windows which frame an extraordinary view of the Eiffel Tower.

"So, Mrs. Durand, are you prepared to represent UNESCO and to open our office in Ha Noi? As you know, you will be the only UNESCO international staff member, and we can only provide you with a minuscule operating budget. But the Vietnamese are keen to have an office, and I have promised the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Nguyen Dy Nien that we would be present before the end of this year". My heart skipped a beat at these words. My dream had come true, I was off to Viet Nam.

A few weeks later, having packed up my things and given up my Paris apartment, armed with a large UN flag for the office, my lap top and a manual chock full of policies and procedures, I was on an Air France flight on my way to Ha Noi landing, many hours later, at the old Noi Bai international airport. My diplomatic visa was carefully scrutinized by a stern Vietnamese border agent who stamped a number of times my red passport and returned it to me without a word...hmm....hopefully, things would pick up in the smiling department....

And they did as soon as I arrived at the luggage carousel where I was greeted by members of the UNESCO National Commission and by no less than its Head: Madame Nguyen Thi Hoi who, to my good fortune, had just returned to Viet Nam from her prestigious post as Ambassador to Austria to be appointed Secretary General of the National Commission.....There were flowers, smiles in abundance and warm welcoming words. I had arrived at my new home and my wonderful relationship with Madame Hoi had just begun.

My love affair with Viet Nam was instantaneous, beginning with the ride from the airport into town. As I looked at the rice fields, at the small gentle women in conical hats, the animals in the fields and the birds flying above as my car, courtesy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sped along dusty roads, I had the feeling to have landed on a beautiful new planet and knew that to succeed I would have to learn to walk again. My learning curve had just begun.

The UNDP had made a reservation for me in one of the local guest houses near their office but a few days after unfortunate co-habitation with a

huge cockroach, I decided to move to an hotel on the West Lake, Ho Tay, a magical place just outside of the hustle and bustle of the city core. The West Lake eventually became the place where I found a beautiful Vietnamese style house, narrow in width and three stories high, a house of which I still dream as I reminisce about this wonderful posting.

But in those days, dreaming was only while in bed, exhausted and at night. There was so much to do!!!! I took up a small office in the basement of the UNDP compound which I shared with a Junior Officer and a rat, each of whom luckily kept their distances and did not bother me. From there eventually, I moved to slightly more comfortable premises and hired my first local staff: Ms Bui Thi Hai, an extraordinary woman who became my Virgil in the woods of Viet Nam's bureaucracy as we went about the task to establish UNESCO's office.

It seemed that everything had to be done in the shortest possible time: purchase the official car ( a Toyota Camry that came from Hong Kong but was only available in dark green and not the UN blue we had been instructed to purchase!) and hire the driver, a wonderful middle-aged man, Mr Tien, a fixture in the office until his recent retirement. And of course, our major preoccupation: securing new premises for our office. This was not an easy endeavour as our budget was rather limited but , gratefully, the UNESCO National Commission with the assistance of Mrs Hoi came to our rescue and we were able to rent a wonderful former French colonial villa in the French Quarter close to the Hi Chi Minh Mausoleum.

Members of the Commission and Mrs Hai performed the required rituals to bless the arrival of UNESCO at this location; furniture made of local materials and in local styles was ordered and brought in to grace our offices; computers, plants and some beautiful art pieces I had been asked to select from the UNESCO collection for the new office were placed throughout the office. The UNESCO House in Ha Noi was soon open for business. And the unforgettable day came, when a few of my colleagues (mostly volunteers and local staff on short term contracts) and I had the privilege to hoist the UN flag high on the front balcony of our office. UNESCO Ha Noi was now a reality.

Meanwhile, in Paris, the Organization was preparing to receive its delegates to the biennial General Conference and many Member States had been expressing their dissatisfaction about the decentralization policies of Dr Mayor....too many one- man offices ( with me being one of the few one-woman office!), insufficient resources for adequate representation....waste of precious resources....etc...) . The DG defended his policies but his term was up and the new DG, Mr K. Matsuura was coming in on a wave of reforms demanded by

the Member States. Many feared that some of the new offices would not survive the winds of change.

After attending the General Conference, I went back to Viet Nam with a heavy heart.... would our new office become a casualty of the reforms? Would our budding programmes, initiatives and contacts have to be abandoned before they even had a chance to prove their effectiveness? And what about the local staff we had just hired.....how could I possibly face them with such news? My fears grew as the time went by although in no way would I show anyone and , least of all, the Vietnamese Government officials and the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) colleagues, that something other than the ordinary was on my plate. I smiled, kept on paying my courtesy visits to the other Heads of Agencies, ambassadors and government ministers and continued to search for partnerships to support our programmes. I went on auto pilot.

A few months after the General Conference, we were informed that Mr Matsuura, our new DG, would pay an official visit to Viet Nam. Official bilateral and multilateral meetings were organized and a special session on Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was convened to brief the DG on activities in this area by us and the entire UNCT. The DG stayed at the official Guest House of the Vietnamese government, and it was here, in this historic place in which President Ho Chi Minh met with many of his co-workers, that I was summoned to discuss the situation of the UNESCO Viet Nam Office. Or at least, so I thought.

In preparation of this meeting, I had drafted a memo for the DG in which I stated that as an international civil servant, my loyalty was to him and to the Organization and that of course I would comply with any decisions that he would regard as most appropriate to take. That included of course, perhaps, having to go through the motions of closing the newly opened UNESCO Ha Noi Office. The memo had been sent via the Director of Cabinet ahead of our meeting. My heart was pounding as I was driven to meet this DG with whom I had not had a face-to-face meeting before.

Much to my surprise, the issue of closing the office never even came up....Mr Matsuura turned out to be the kindest and most gracious man I have ever met. He asked many pertinent questions about Viet Nam and its current political situation and chose to elaborate in detail about the briefing I had prepared rather than approach the thorny subject of the presence of UNESCO in Viet Nam.

It was a long and very productive meeting. A meeting that sealed my loyalty to Mr Matsuura until the day in which, sadly, I was to retire from

UNESCO. My admiration for this high official of the Japanese Government and consumed diplomat, was not just for his deep knowledge and understanding of the workings of the UN System and UNESCO in particular, but rather, as I came to know him better in meetings to come, for his great wisdom and humanity. But at that juncture, in Viet Nam, naturally, my admiration was mixed with my immense gratitude and relief at his apparent decision that the UNESCO Viet Nam office would remain open.

A few days after this meeting, my DG left and life went back to normal. The UNESCO Hanoi office grew and many new initiatives in the fields of competence of UNESCO were launched. The UNESCO National Commission and the office worked closely together, and Mrs Hoi and I had the chance to develop a productive cooperation that eventually became a life-long friendship. The cooperation we established between the UNESCO office and the office of the National Commission became a model and was adopted by other Field Offices of UNESCO. It was with a heavy heart that I left in May 2002 to take up my new responsibilities as UNESCO Representative to the Maghreb region.

( *Rosa Maria Durand* [rosamariadurand@gmail.com](mailto:rosamariadurand@gmail.com))

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## **Genocide : “Never again”**

*Dr Michael Atchia from Mauritius was Chief of Education and Training at UNEP HQ in Nairobi from 1986 to 1996, later promoted to Programme Director, working under the directorship of Dr Mustapha Tolba for whom he has immense admiration for the launching of the key agreements (Montreal Protocol,) for the environment.*

*He co-led for several years the joint UNESCO-UNEP IEEP and is credited with having launched ESD as well as Environmental Management as an integrated discipline. A co-author of Chapter 36 of Agenda 21, as adopted by all nations of the world in Rio in 1992.*

*He describes the Rwanda experience of 1993 as the worst of his career, but surely the most life transforming.*

*A past Vice-President of FAFICS; Secretary-General AFICS-Mauritius.*

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**The author was in Rwanda as part of a UNEP mission on the environment a few weeks before the genocide of 1993, a genocide where up to 800,000 people were massacred and which NO one was able to prevent. An abominable failure for the world!**

As author Ann Clwyd said, “*Genocide is the responsibility of the entire world.*”. This is no longer an issue for Iraq alone to deal with. The entire planet has a solemn responsibility to deal swiftly with ISIS and to neutralize their threat to civilization.

**What is Genocide?** It is the deliberate and systematic destruction, in whole or in part, of an ethnic, racial, religious or national group. It is inhuman, immoral, illegal and completely unacceptable. It involves violence against people simply because of their difference.

**Historical perspective.** Throughout History we have seen groups of misguided men, of all continents of all ‘religion’ overtaken by transient madness, committing genocide. Always after a genocide the world says “*never again*”. There had been so many examples, so many duly forgotten. For the sake of remembrance let us recall a few:

- Nazi Germans exterminating more than 5 million Jews during WWII.
- the Hutus massacring 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda in 1993, during which was uttered on RADIO MILLES COLLINES (directing the killers as they moved from village to village) one of the worst phrase ever uttered: “*n’oubliez pas les femmes et les enfants*” (Meaning ‘do not forget to also massacre the women and children, so that the genocide may be complete’)
- the massacres of Muslims by Christians during the Crusades, and during the recapture of Spain from the Moslems.
- in 1915, leaders of the Turkish government set in motion a plan to expel and massacre Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire. Out of about 2 million Armenians at the time of the massacre by the early 1920s, when

the massacres and deportations finally ended, some 1.5 million of Turkey's Armenians were dead, with many more forcibly removed from the country;

- the elimination of the Amerindians by settlers from Europe. Let us hear Chief Seattle: *“My people are few. They resemble the scattering trees of a storm-swept plain...There was a time when our people covered the land as the waves of a wind-ruffled sea cover its shell-paved floor, but that time long since passed away with the greatness of tribes that are now but a mournful memory.”*. Similarly for the Aborigines of Australia, the traditional indigenous people of the Amazon basin and of other parts of the world.
- Slavery, a form of cultural genocide, practiced commonly in the ancient world, but in recent times mainly to people of African origin, uprooted and sold into forced labour, including here in Mauritius.
- Stalin's Gulags, the 'imprisonment' of the Palestinian people till today, the strongly uneven world trade which enriches many and leave many (especially producers of basic commodities) living close to starvation level
- **Today?** Genocides or actions which look strangely like them are still present in the world in 2015/2025. An example: ISIS's persecution of Iraqi Christians. ISIS had already forced tens of thousands of men, women and children to flee for their lives, was fast becoming a genocide, religious leaders had warned. After the killing or hostage taking of 1,300 Israelis attending a music festival, the tragedy in Gaza where over 60,000 people in majority Palestinian women and children have been killed by Israel since 2023. They first destroyed all housing infrastructure, hospitals, schools, water, and food supplies, thereby achieving the elimination of the people of Gaza, men, women and children. And then elimination through famine.

## **What to do?**

**Love one another.** Today we must pray for those being persecuted, we must protest by word and deed, including at the political level our voice at the United Nations.

With Elie Wiesel, *“for the dead and the living, we must bear witness.”*

We must learn in our schools the culture of peace and when conflict arise that of conflict resolution, reconciliation and forgiveness.

And with poet Bertolt Brecht, understand the need to keep on fighting for justice, never to give up : *“The first time it was reported that our friends were being butchered there was a cry of horror. Then a hundred were butchered. But when a thousand were butchered and there was no end to the butchery, a blanket of silence spread.*

*When evildoing comes like falling rain, nobody calls out "stop!"*

*When crimes begin to pile up, they become invisible. When suffering becomes unendurable the cries are no longer heard. The cries, too, fall like rain in summer.”*

### **My Rwanda experience (1993)**

- That of animating a seminar, in the presence of the minister of Environment of Rwanda, on *La gestion de l’environnement* in Kigali. Condemning the *parcellisation* of land plots amongst the numerous children most Rwandans had (families of 9-11 children were not uncommon) with an upheld handkerchief which correctly calculated would be the size of each one’s land plot if that trend continued for another 5 generations. The population pressure was no doubt a factor in the imminent genocide!
- Hearing the medical doctor Minister of Environment, later turn leader of the genocide, uttering those words on *Radio Mille Collines* about ‘not forgetting women and children’.
- Our unofficial visit to President Juvenal Habyarimana (2 UNEP staff members and one consultant) where I took my courage in both hands to ask him for reconciliation, his country being at this time, a few weeks before his death in a plane crash and the start of the massacre, in a state of civil war. He told me loud and angry *“Quoi ! avec ces rebelles? Jamais!* I pursued as calmly as I could -within the rules of protocol in meeting a head of state – to remind him of the advantages of peace-making, of the technical assistance which could resume for his country, which then could get along with development. To no avail. By the way these ‘rebels’ led by Paul Kagame eventually took power; Kagame has remained the

elected ruler of the new Rwanda ever since. On coming out of The President's palace, the Minister of Foreign Affairs who was present said to me *"You know what he would have done to me if I had said what you said to him? I might have disappeared the next night!"* But said I *"I have attempted to sow the seeds of peace in his mind! And as far as I am concerned for my personal safety, in any case am flying back to Nairobi in 3 days' time"*. Which we did.

- Revisiting that Church in Kigali where 5,000 people, who had taken refuge within, had been massacred, including the priest who tried to prevent rebels from entering. The souls of people who departed were still there it seemed. That was during one of the biggest interagency missions to a country organized by UN and other entities, fairly soon after the end of the genocide. On the environmental front we arranged for a fleet of lorries with bottled gas to come all the way from Mombasa in an attempt to help people in need also to prevent them from destroying the remaining vegetation (including in the *Nyungwe Forest National Park*) for firewood. The process of reconciliation and rebuilding began.

*(Michael Atchia [mklatchia@intnet.mu](mailto:mklatchia@intnet.mu))*

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**“The experience gained over the past 30-odd years  
with the United Nations have stood me in good stead ever since”**

**Miranda Patel**

Only the United Nations would employ me, for I was a dependent spouse in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and therefore ineligible for a work permit. In 1980 spouses were finally allowed to work in the Organization, so I walked into the Personnel Section (later to be renamed) of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), one of the five regional commissions worldwide. ECA, established in 1958, promotes the economic and social development of its 54 member States, fosters intraregional cooperation and furthers international cooperation for the development of Africa. I was offered an administrative position in the Recruitment Unit in which, so I was told, my

bilingualism in English and French would be an asset. More useful however, as it turned out, was my ability to deal with confidential matters. I can therefore not divulge anything more about the job ...

A few years later, after various positions of administrative nature at ECA, I was entrusted with running the newly established Security Plan Office (yet more confidentiality). After all there was a civil war on in Ethiopia at the time. In the Easter holidays of 1991, all staff members were requested to remove their children from the country as a rebel invasion of Addis Ababa was expected. I sent my own children off to stay with friends in Rome, Italy, until the beginning of the summer term. The rebels had not yet arrived, so it was back to school. It was not until 21 May that the President left the country. The curfew which had been at midnight was now at 9 p.m. Shortly after, tanks were seen and heard surrounding the presidential palace, banging opposite the ECA headquarters. The powers that be decided to evacuate spouses and children to Nairobi, Kenya. My son and daughter were on the last plane out of Addis Ababa before the airport was closed. Then the rebels marched into town and the curfew was set at 6 p.m.

Ten days later, my husband and I were also evacuated, after a few scares, such as shooting in the streets and the explosion of a stock of ammunition which caused many windows at ECA to be blown out. I had to be careful walking on broken glass on the way to the office, which was the only one functioning, and had to be chaperoned by security guards at that time, since the rebels controlled the city. All other staff members were confined to their homes until they too could be evacuated.

Soon a semblance of normalcy returned to the city. A couple of years later, after 14 years in Ethiopia, I resigned and returned to Mauritius. However, my career with the United Nations was to continue as I was subsequently offered a post in Geneva, Switzerland, at the Palais des Nations, focal point for multilateral diplomacy and European headquarters of the United Nations, where I remained as an English editor until my retirement in 2012.

The many skills I learned and the experience gained over the past 30-odd years with the United Nations have stood me in good stead as I am, although retired, still being asked to help out with the ever-increasing onslaught of documents in English which need attention before they are translated into the five other official languages of the United Nations.

(Miranda Patel [mpatel21550@gmail.com](mailto:mpatel21550@gmail.com))

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**‘Being part of the change, we want to see’.**

## **Maya Khankhoje**

*Maya worked for ICAO, the International Civil Aviation Organization in Montreal, as an interpreter/translator in the Spanish and English sections from 1978 to 2003 when she retired. Prior to that she freelanced in New Delhi, Mexico City and at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. She is currently co-editor of [www.montrealserai.com](http://www.montrealserai.com).]*

They say of our trade: *traduttori traditori*. This means that if you are faithful to the source language, you might betray the target language and vice versa. Either way you have to walk a fine line. One of the tasks of a simultaneous interpreter is to betray neither whilst maintaining the decorum of the institution you are working for. Our sole master is the integrity of the message.

Being an interpreter in ICAO is pretty straightforward: maintain your cruising speed but don't lose your bearings. For this you must be well prepared at all times and not lose your cool in stormy weather. But ICAO is not only about making planes not fall out of the sky. It is also about making them land safely, a skill which is very much needed during diplomatic negotiations.

On one such occasion a very passionate delegate from a Spanish-speaking country stated in no uncertain terms that he was willing to “abide by” the decision of the President of the Council but that he basically disagreed with him. The British interpreter in the English booth toned down the message with characteristic British understatement. The delegate was not amused and ramped up his tone. The interpreter repeated his polite version. The President then decided to break the impasse with a short recess after which the meeting resumed. The delegate took the floor again, pointed at me sitting in the Spanish booth and asked me to interpret him into English. I did it with the right dose of Latin American verve and the day was saved.

Negotiating diplomatic language is one thing, but dealing with off-colour language is another. What do you do when the speaker uses four-letter words

that have no place in your professional lexicon? You tone down the offensive word a notch or you resort to humour. Once a Dutch-speaking chairman let off some Dutch curse words and then tried to laugh it off by claiming nobody would understand him. I didn't want to let this recidivist off the hook so I turned on my mike and announced that our Belgian colleague would be very happy to interpret his expletives. That silenced him for a while but not for long.

At another meeting of a panel of technical experts this same chairman made a crude misogynist joke which I had certainly no intention of interpreting. My version: "Please laugh, the chairman has just indulged in a sexist joke". That brought the house down. By the way, I was never reprimanded for breaking professional protocol by contributing with my two bits, perhaps because ICAO espouses, at least formally, a gender equality policy.

What happens when a delegate misuses words in a language he does not speak very fluently? An interpreter must use her judgement to read the subtext correctly. A deep knowledge of the subject and at least a passing familiarity with the speaker's speech patterns help. Many years ago an elderly technical expert wanted to explain his motivations in suggesting a certain course of action. "Mr. President, permit me to expose myself..." To this day, I have visions of that old-fashioned gentleman opening his gabardine to the world!

And what about mispronunciations? The following story, which I witnessed, is now part of ICAO lore. It involves yet another fiery Spanish speaking delegate who had vehemently objected to a position paper under discussion. "I object to this piss of paper!" Once again, a coffee break was declared to cool tempers. A fellow interpreter approached the delegate and tried to coach him on the proper way to pronounce the long "ee" sound in English. He also advised him to use another word if he found the task too difficult. When the session resumed, the delegate once again asked for the floor and very wisely chose another word. "I object to this shit of paper!" he said triumphantly. Forgive him for he knew not what he said. Or did he?

I've spoken about the *peccadillos* of the delegates, but interpreters can and do make mistakes. When an interpreter up there in a hidden booth goofs up the delegates often turn around and realize that we are not androids but humans and they might even be inclined to make our task easier by slowing down, or e-nun-cia-ting or even avoiding untranslatable colloquialisms. It is no secret that Americans love comparing apples and oranges, an expression often lost in translation. On one such occasion, when the US expert did not think the Russian expert's proposal was such a good idea, he chided him for comparing apples and oranges. The Russian interpreter must have translated that as "making a fruit salad out of it" because the Russian delegate riposted: "It might be a fruit

salad but let's hope it's tasty". When I heard the word "tasty", in a strange episode of synesthesia, I could not remember its English equivalent. My mind was flooded with the heady scent of delicious meat-filled pierogis so I improvised: "It might be a fruit salad but let's hope it's fruitful". All parties applauded my felicitous mistake.

Another mistake that I shall never live on involves the relations between another international organization and ICAO. Let me say from the outset that these two organizations are sister organizations and complement each other's work. But occasionally there can be minor



misunderstandings to which I contributed unwittingly. While discussing some very important entente in a closed-door meeting, one of the national representatives said: "If we can't beat them join them". My version: "If we can't join them beat them". Nobody noticed my gaffe until I decided to correct it (hint: when stock phrases are mishandled the brain tends to hear the correct version). A few days later as I was walking down Montreal's main avenue, a member of the sister organization stopped me. "So you want to beat us, do you?" Obviously, the closed doors were not shut very tight, but it was all in good fun.

As a former staff member, I am proud to say that ICAO antedates the United Nations by two years. Its original mandate was to allow planes to fly safely in and out of a world with uncertain borders. Diplomacy continues to be a very important part of its mission but all countries agree that planes must be kept aloft regardless of political or economic considerations. It takes refined diplomatic skills to make this a reality.

Once ICAO sent a small team on a fact-finding mission to a country involved in a dispute with another country. The dispute involved planes, of course. At the end of our mission, we were invited to have dinner with the Head of State. Once business talks were over, we sat down at a long table with five of us on one side and five of them on the other side. The Head of State suggested that I be allowed to enjoy my meal in peace but his official interpreter gently overrode that decision. "Maya and I have decided on how to split our work". True, I went hungry and so did my colleague. But I did get a chance to stop feeling invisible and start feeling like a real part of the team. Our gracious host had encouraged a lowly interpreter to participate in the conversation like a full-

fledged member of the team. It was a rare luxury to have my colleague interpret what I had to say. As if my opinions matter.

But they do. My opinions and yours and those of all staff members of UN agencies matter. Very often interpreters feel like butlers in a lofty household. We are privy to dirty secrets, we witness human follies, we discover dark and devious truths, but we must remain silent. Unlike children, we must be heard and not seen. We are often accused of being cynical and elitist. There is some truth to that, at least to the cynical part. If we, like other UN staff members, are likely to be critical it is because we love what the UN represents and mourn its loss of prestige in the world at large.

How can we help improve the UN and its agencies? By continuing to be good citizens in our sunset years. By putting our knowledge and experience to good use. By critiquing when we must and praising when we can. By remembering that we have been part of a unique historical adventure that is undergoing a radical transformation. **By being part of the change which we want to see.**

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## **Service in the UN**

The Berlin Wall came down in November 1989. At the time I worked in the Vienna International Centre and had an office on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor of the tower housing the International Atomic Energy Agency

From this vantage point I witnessed some aftermath of the wall coming down. It was not nearly as dramatic as the events in Berlin itself but rather fascinating. I refer to the ‘invasion’ of small, noisy, belching autos from countries adjacent to Austria. They came in waves from Hungary, Romania, Poland etc along the autobahn, hundreds of them. Then in the next few days I witnessed the reason they had come. The roofs of these tiny autos were loaded high with ‘dream goods from the west-including electronics such as TVs, videos etc, which were not available to them in their own countries!

It was an experience for me –a Canadian who had grown up with all these luxuries and more and these visitors who had not had an opportunity to do the same thing until they were free to come to Vienna to acquire them.

**Robert Day**

*Worked at IAEA Vienna 1979-1994, under Director General Hans Blix*

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## **I DANCED FOR IDI AMIN**

**Carol Hoffmann**

Former Air Transport Officer and External Relations Officer, International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).

In the 1970s I was an Air Transport Officer in the Air Transport Bureau of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). One of my responsibilities was co-ordination with the regional civil aviation commissions that had been established, the fledgling African Civil Aviation Commission (AFCAC).

AFCAC had been created by a constitutional conference convened by ICAO and the then Organization of African Unity (OAU), now the African Union (AU), in Addis Ababa in 1964 and was fully established and began functioning in 1969. In 1978 it became an OAU Specialized Agency in the field of Civil Aviation and it continued to receive ICAO technical, administrative and financial assistance until 2007

I attended plenary sessions of AFCAC, held every two years, in the 1970s. In 1975 the Plenary was held in Kampala, Uganda. Later that year the then Organization of African Unity was also holding its Annual Summit in Uganda at which the President of Uganda, Idi Amin, would be elected President of the OAU. The Ugandan authorities saw the AFCAC meeting as a practice run, or dress rehearsal, for the OAU Summit.

Participants in the AFCAC Plenary were invited to a social event on the grounds of State House, in Entebbe, formerly the residence of the British Governor of Uganda when Entebbe was the seat of government for the

Protectorate of Uganda, and subsequently the official residence of the President of Uganda. The mansion was in a beautiful location on an elevation looking down towards the shores of Lake Victoria, stretching away to the South. And Idi Amin was there to greet us - again part of the dress rehearsal?

We gathered around and President Amin informed us that, anticipating the forthcoming OAU meeting, the mansion had been named Cape town View, as one could look down the lake from it towards the then nemesis to the South. He then produced his guitar and announced that he would play a tune entitled “I am the girl who loves the boy from the Armed Forces” - remember he was a committed soldier. We danced. My colleagues and I had to agree that he had tremendous charisma.

## **Carol Hoffmann**

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### **My gratitude to the UN WFP**

**What it takes to get the food to where it needs to go: Reflections on my 27 years with the UN and the World Food Programme ( December 2020).**

*The author Tun Myat, a former career UN veteran of 27 years, started at WFP Headquarters in Rome, Italy in 1978. He became he became Chief of Staff to the then Executive Director of WFP in 1988, Director of the Logistics Division in 1991, and Director of the Resources and External Relations Division in 1997. In April 2000 he was appointed by the then UN Secretary-General as UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq and was later transferred to UN Headquarters as UN Security Coordinator in July 2002. He retired in September 2004 at age 62. He now lives in retirement in Yangon, Myanmar with his wife of 55 years.*

*Caption: Tun Myat and Somali warlord Muhammad Farah Aydid on the tarmac at the airstrip in Bardera, Somalia in late September 1992. 'Tun Myat*

*was representing WFP on the UN High-level Inter-Agency Mission visiting Somalia. A year later, following the War for Mogadishu in October 1993, immortalized by the hit-film, "Black Hawk Down," General Aydid became the FBI's most-wanted man. Photo: © Tun Myat*



**My career with the UN started in 1978, with the World Food Programme, in Rome. I had just arrived from my home country of Myanmar.**

My first big challenge came in January 1979, when I was asked to travel to Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania to try and salvage some six thousand tons of assorted food, mostly from the U.S. and the EU, that was stuck in the port, for varying periods of time, some over many months, on their way to Bujumbura in Burundi.

The WFP Country Director and our agent, AMI, the Belgian international freight forwarders, had both informed us that the goods could not be sent to Burundi due to a number of factors, primarily stemming from the on-going war in the West Lake Region between Idi Amin's Uganda on one side and Kenya and Tanzania on the other.

My task was to see what can still be salvaged and sold as distressed goods and the rest to be disposed-off locally in the best manner possible.

The fifteen years of experience in shipping, port, customs and cargo operations I had under my belt at the time did not prepare me for the shock that awaited me in the port of Dar that day.

Such was the complete and utter chaos! The Burundi/Kigom transit facility at Dar that normally has a capacity of about 3,000 tons had over 17,000 tons of assorted Burundi-bound goods, most of which had overflowed into the regular Tanzania port area, stymying operations of the port almost to a stand-still.

I determined that the only viable option was to take all the food consignments out of the port to a large gated storage facility about 10 miles away, the Ubungo facility. There, the goods could be separated, good from bad, fumigated and re-conditioned.

Moreover, gentle but firm arm-twisting of the concerned entities like the Burundi Ambassador, the USAID Director in Dar, the Tanzanian Railways, AMI who also represented the US NGOs also and to seek the willing collaboration of the Tanzanian Port, Customs and Railway Authorities made it all happen.

WFP headquarters very quickly sent the US \$20,000 I had asked for to meet the expenses for this operation. Samples of all individual consignments were sent via the UK Embassy pouch, to Tropical Stored Products Centre (TSPC) in the UK for quality and condition testing. Goods no longer fit for human consumption were donated to the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) assisted feed farm outside Dar. Quite miraculously, I and my capable shipping assistant Franco Mascarino, after working extremely long hours, often foregoing meals, were able to dispatch dedicated block-trains direct from Ubungo to Kigoma, within three to four weeks.

All except a consignment of about 700 tons of bagged wheat flour which was fast running out of shelf-life and needed to be consumed fast, was put on road trucks and sent to a UNHCR-run refugee centre in what was then called Zaire.

This mission's achievement was simple enough: over 6,000 tons of food, already classified as lost and given up for good, was saved and put back at the disposal of the, the school-children of Burundi, for whom it was originally intended. The report of this Mission was very warmly received in Rome, including by the then Executive Director of WFP, the Canadian, Gerry Vogel, who remarked that what was accomplished was a "Mission Impossible."

The World Food Program is known simply for distributing food to those who need it. Behind the scenes, the work of WFP is complex. It entails complicated logistics, communicating across languages and cultures, negotiations among

parties with competing interests, unpredictable natural and political events, finding the best solution possible under difficult circumstances and time pressure.

It is the dedication of the WFP staff worldwide that have earned the organization the Nobel Peace Prize. I salute colleagues at the organization, and I hope that this prize inspires many more people to get involved in the UN's work.

This first challenge of my career—and many others—shows that one does not necessarily need to be at a senior-level position in the UN to make a difference! I was a rookie who had yet to complete my probationary requirements when I undertook the mission to Dar. Hard work and a judicious application of one's experience, knowledge, and good sense can prove to make the difference.

*Secretary-General Appoints Tun Myat of Myanmar as New United Nations Security Coordinator, 13 May 2002*

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