

The World Economic and Social Survey at Sixty

It has been sixty years since the mandate for the production of the *World Economic and Social Survey* was established by the General Assembly in 1947. The *Survey* was known as the *World Economic Report* from its first edition in 1948, then from 1955 as the *World Economic Survey* and from 1994 as the *World Economic and Social Survey*.

The mandate for the *Survey* may be traced back to the second session of the General Assembly. In its resolution 118 (II) of 31 October 1947, the Assembly recommended to the Economic and Social Council (a) that it consider a survey of current world economic conditions and trends annually, and at such other intervals as it considers necessary, in the light of its responsibility under Article 55 of the Charter of the United Nations to promote the solution of international economic problems, higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development, (b) that such consideration include an analysis of the major dislocations of needs and supplies in the world economy and (c) that it make recommendations as to the appropriate measures to be taken by the Assembly, the States Members of the United Nations and the specialized agencies concerned. In the same resolution, the Secretary-General was requested to assist the Council and its subsidiary organs by providing factual surveys and analyses of world economic conditions and trends.

With the experience of the Great Depression very much in mind and in the context of the rise of fascism which it had helped engender, the General Assembly sought an action-oriented report – one that would not just describe and analyse the world's economic situation, but also make recommendations to the appropriate United Nations bodies in order to avert the kind of economic catastrophe that had led to the Second World War. The *Survey* has fulfilled its mandate of surveying economic conditions, providing an analysis of the source of “dislocations” and making appropriate recommendations. At the present time, two volumes are being issued – one entitled *World Economic Situation and Prospects*, which undertakes a more short-term economic analysis and has, since 1999, been a joint product of DESA, UNCTAD and the regional commissions. The other one is known as *World Economic and Social Survey*, which deals with particular long-term issues such as population ageing (as analysed in the 2007 *Survey* on “Development in an Ageing World”).

Since its inception, the *Survey* has been produced in New York by the same Department of the Secretariat, originally the Department of Economic Affairs (DEA), now known as the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). The Department of Economic Affairs was itself the institutional successor of the League of Nations Economic Intelligence Service which had produced a *World Economic Survey* starting in 1931-1932. Although the authors of the reports remain anonymous, in fact some of the world's leading economists have contributed to them, including Michał Kalecki, the primary author of the 1948 *Report*. Another eminent economist who worked on the *Report* in the early days was Hans Singer. On the other hand, throughout its history the *Survey* has benefited from the written inputs, advice and encouragement of major academic economists outside the United Nations system as well as of economists working in other bodies within the system, including the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the regional commissions. The Department gratefully acknowledges the help that it has received from so many people in producing its "flagship publication".

Recently, as a result of the United Nations Intellectual History Project, considerable interest has been generated in the contribution that the United Nations has made to our understanding of how the world economy works and of those policies at the national, regional and international levels that can achieve the goals of promoting "social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom" and employing "international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples", as set out in the Charter. This Project is based on the premise that ideas matter and that understanding how those ideas are generated is of practical importance.

The series of past *Surveys* that can be downloaded from this website will enable policymakers and scholars to assess just how far the world has progressed in realizing the goals of the Charter and how thinking on development at the United Nations has evolved over time. They also provide an understanding of the reasoning behind the formation of much of the international machinery whose creation the Charter had anticipated. But the *Surveys* are of much more than historical interest. By enabling policymakers and scholars to assess the genesis and impacts of many of the ideas that were prevalent at the time of their issuance, the *Surveys* can make a vital contribution to the debates that are still being held on how to improve the conditions and prospects of the billions of men, women and children living in deprivation and poverty.