



GREY Talks



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## What I learned at the UN in four lessons

All and each one of my forty years of professional life were devoted to multilateral cooperation, including serving at UNCTAD from 1999 to 2014, when I retired and decided, stubbornly, to continue defending the same UN cause. I learned more than what I brought to the organisation.

**Lesson #1: sometimes neutrality means to take a stand.**

The job that guarantees you will always work with bright people does not exist. At UNCTAD, I was lucky to have the best

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boss I could dream of: Mr. Rubens Ricupero, who was Secretary-General when I joined. He used to say that when working at the UN on development issues you cannot be neutral, particularly considering UNCTAD mandate and engagement. He defended the sensitive and politically incorrect "positive agenda" of the poorest countries in the WTO arena, grounded on UNCTAD staff research. He stood still in a dignified silence when H.E. Mr. John Bolton, Ambassador of the USA, burst into his office, shouting: "you are not allowed to have your own ideas!". That day I learned that an international civil servant must stay cool but does not give up on his / her convictions when they are based on facts and justice.

At UNCTAD I happily spent more time studying than teaching. My advice: be as modest as a non-expert should be, be curious and never stop enlarging your expertise.

### Lesson #2: manage your expectations and frustrations.

One of my tasks at UNCTAD was to train developing countries trade negotiators, to identify their interests and to defend them. My expectations were met to a great extent. But I soon realised how difficult it is to raise developed countries' funds for a purpose that does not match their interests. I also worked on UN interagency coordination: that was rewarding beyond expectations at the field level but frustrating because my goals were not supported by the individualistic egos of many Heads of Agencies. Disconnections within UNCTAD units also complicated my life. They mirror those within the UN system and result from the toxic race for donors' financing: once you grasp this, you sleep better. I learned, gradually and painfully, that a UN staff member must be bipolar: apply *realpolitik*, sometimes cynically, to achieve your goals. But never stop reading the UN Charter, no matter how ambitious it is. Corollary to this lesson: have faith (you need a lot of it) in the religion of multilateralism while being aware that you are dealing with the limitations of human beings and their national sovereignties. Aim for the sky but keep your feet on the ground.

### Lesson #3: you do not know what you do not know

When I joined UNCTAD I had already had a long career as a Venezuelan economic negotiator on my shoulders, so I relaxed: I knew my stuff! I quickly discovered how vast my ignorance was on international trade and development issues and beyond, because of the diversity of the UN stakeholders of all latitudes (Governments and non-governmental players, meaning a plethora of situations and all sorts of agendas). What a universe of activities and opportunities to open your eyes and your mind. Therefore, at UNCTAD I happily spent more time studying than teaching. My advice: be as modest as a non-expert should be, be curious and never stop enlarging your expertise. The work of your peers next door or at the other end of the UN galaxy enriches your knowledge. You cannot rest trade and development issues are a moving target, and more than others, never-ending.

### Lesson #4: multiculturalism is more than a gastronomic cocktail.

My father was an Italian international civil servant. Since I was a toddler, I was used to jumping from country to country, changing schools, cultures, and friends. This borderless and transgenerational adaptability is reflected in the menus of my family that mix *raclette*, *arepas*, *tiramisú*, plantains, scones, *ajiaco*, *stroopwafels*, lasagne (not altogether on the same plate, though), with a salad of four languages and diverse passports

(minimum two *per capita*). When I joined UNCTAD I realised why wearing multicultural glasses is not only enriching but also facilitates your tasks: I was naturally prepared to understand developing countries' concerns while explaining to them developed countries' policies and mindsets. At the UN multiculturalism is contagious, diversity is the norm. Nationality, language, religion are not important in spite of interferences of member States in the appointments of senior posts that compromise the neutrality and the independence, and therefore the benefits of a multicultural civil service. It is obviously not a perfect working environment, not yet free from discriminations and biases, but certainly better as compared to the job opportunities in the public or private sectors that I had. The UN is where I could satisfy my multicultural needs and transfer them, with pride, to my descendants as a vaccination against intolerance and xenophobia.

Today I continue disseminating UN values by teaching (guess what? development issues!) and through Greycells' multiple activities. I could add more lessons to this list. The most important one is that I am aware it was a privilege to serve the UN. ▶

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(1995 -2004).



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