

25 April 2011: Lydia Swart on findings/observations in the Center's book on the G77

In writing *The Group of 77: Perspectives on its Role in the UN General Assembly*, Jakob Lund and I aim to understand why the group was formed; how its is organized; what it has achieved over almost 40 years of existence; what its positions have been in the General Assembly more recently; and what possible scenarios may influence its future.

Clearly, the group has been successful in garnering attention for issues related to development and trade; putting and keeping these on the UN's agenda; and having them translated in countless resolutions that passed thanks to the group's numerical power in the GA. However, the group's efforts to get the North to use its economic power to implement these resolutions have been far less successful. Whether this lack of implementation is a key reason why the development gap between rich and poor countries has not been bridged, however, cannot be easily determined. What is clear, though, is that this lack of implementation fuels resentments from the South about being marginalized at the UN and contributes to the group asserting the power it *does* have in entities like the Budget Committee of the General Assembly.

As I indicate in **Chapter 1** of our book, in order to understand the Group of 77, one must first consider its beginnings. I explore, among other things, why the Non-Aligned Movement and Group of 77 were established as two separate blocs. Undoubtedly, the G77 started with a more narrow focus, insisting that issues related to trade and development are crucial in overcoming the huge economic disparities in the world, while NAM started with a wider and more pronounced political agenda, seeking neutral ground during the Cold War, promote self-determination and resist colonialism. However, this distinction in focus is not as pronounced as many assume and in spite of political tension between the two Southern blocs, there has been much overlap in positions, especially since the mid-seventies. I think it is interesting to note that Latin America as a whole has tended to be more invested in the G77 than the NAM.

In my review of the organizational framework of the G77 in **Chapter 2**, I note that in spite of the widely divergent cultural, historical, and economic realities of G77 members, the group is sufficiently united to allow it to continue to play an important role at the UN. I also summarize responses from Southern delegates interviewed by us in regard to the rather prevalent Northern perception that the group's ability to achieve its goals is undermined by the domination of radical countries that the North refers to as the "spoilers." However, it seems to me that there are many fault lines in the group that are more significant than the dominance of particular members. That some countries play a bigger role probably originates to a large extent from having larger missions or from the expertise they gained by chairing the group or hosting its ministerial meetings. And from what we were told, moderate countries regularly resist draft resolutions with more extreme language, some of which never see the light of day.

The fact that the G77 makes up 130 of the 192 UN member states explains why its common positions, once agreed upon, cannot easily be changed. In such a large group, every aspect of its agenda has its own constituencies who will resist change. The lack of flexibility

caused by bloc voting is clearly a problem in the GA and the fact that the most powerful bloc in the North, the European Union, now aims to speak with one voice in foreign policy is making this group also less nimble, and possibly more easily dominated by its richest members.

Our interviews revealed that some countries in the North are worried about the Joint Coordinating Committee's efforts to harmonize the positions between the NAM and the G77. They see this as the "NAM trying to take over the G77." Perhaps the Dutch and Egyptian ambassadors will consider commenting on this in their presentations.

Chapter 3, which focuses on the Second Committee, was written by my co-author Jakob Lund, who regrettably could not be with us today as he has moved back to Denmark. His account of G77 activities in the Second Committee which deals with economic and financial issues clearly shows that the G77 dominates the debate in this committee. I believe Jakob accurately describes how opposing priorities and perspectives cause considerable acrimony and a perpetual stand-off in the Second Committee.

Jakob also reveals that there are voices in the South that express reservations about the Millennium Development Goals. They contend that the Millennium Declaration included a very comprehensive approach for narrowing the development gap and improving lives in the South that cannot be found in the Millennium Development Goals. The dissenters point to specific trade measures, for instance. For many, the MDGs are just a step in the right direction and some wonder how the South can meet its own MDG commitments without receiving sufficient aid first.

Jakob deals at length with the commitment that countries from the North have repeatedly made since the early seventies to spend 0.7% of their Gross National Product on Overseas Development Assistance - a commitment, which as you all know, just a handful of countries have actually met through the years. Although many Northern delegates feel a certain degree of discomfort in this regard, others do not. For example, a US delegate told me that the US never endorsed the 0.7% commitment and does not suffer from "colonial guilt."

I really enjoyed writing **Chapter 4** on the Fifth Committee because after closely monitoring this crucial budget committee for more than 3 years, I feel I really understand its issues, dynamics and negotiations. Unlike the other committees of the GA, the Fifth Committee has a certain degree of concrete power when it determines budgets; assesses the amount of dues each member state needs to pay; or when it agrees on management reforms that can determine the day-to-day operations of the UN Secretariat.

It is my understanding that the G77 became more involved in this committee after then Secretary General Kofi Annan was forced to make budget cuts and reallocations because the US government – the Congress in particular – withheld its dues unilaterally on portions of the UN budget. The G77 contended that not even the biggest donor should be able to force a SG to modify budgets without approval of the entire membership.

When united, the G77 dominates the discussions in the Fifth Committee, especially when the regular budget and dues are on the table. I think this chapter clearly shows that when the US, or the North as a whole, pushes too hard for certain priorities, it actually ends up effectively uniting the South against the North. For many in the North, the G77 uses its influence in the Fifth Committee more for reasons of power than genuine ideological differences. When the South, for instance, succeeds in having more posts approved for development, Northern delegates seem to regard such efforts from the South as ways "to get

jobs for themselves or their cousins.” I think, however, that for the G77, such successes reflect a genuine matter of principle - to force the North to take development more seriously in the GA.

In **Chapter 5**, Jakob discussed the Third Committee where all in all the South is not as united. Especially in regard to human rights, where regional and other groupings appear to prevail. However, Jakob shows that the G77 on occasion will address common issues in the Third Committee, such as the right to development, the right to food, as well as racism and discrimination.

An interesting issue addressed by Jakob is the idea that the North and South could have a reciprocity debate about civil and political rights on the one hand, and social and economic rights on the other. Northern delegates think such a debate is unlikely because too many Southern countries have a poor record on civil and political rights. Jakob describes how it seems that on the G77's cost-benefit scale, avoiding a discussion on civil and political rights trumps pushing the debate on economic rights.

In **Chapter 6**, Jakob explores the affects of the North-South divide on reforming and strengthening the UN system and possible ways to address it. He describes the mistrust and misunderstandings that exist between the North and South and analyzes various methods and ideas that have or can be used to help overcome the power struggles that take place in the GA on such issues as reforming the Security Council or changing the relationship between the Security Council and the General Assembly. The methods reviewed in the chapter include the roles of bridge-builders and informal groups; the relevance of individual leadership and flexibility, among others.

The **last chapter** was particularly interesting to work on because it allowed me to speculate about the G77's future - a subject that is apparently not often or openly discussed within the group itself or elsewhere. To me it seems that the group's unity and effectiveness, and therefore its continued relevance, may be at risk for a variety of reasons, including the impacts of the current financial crisis causing Northern governments' to undertake austerity measures and make them even less inclined to satisfy financial demands from the South; the growing number of emerging economies among G77 members, which may result in their increased alliance with the North; the role and influence of the exclusive G20 - which includes seven G77 members - and which may seek to set the global agenda instead of the GA; and the strategies employed by the North to undermine unity in the G77 by using its financial power or through demarches, complaining to capitals about UN diplomats.

Although one often hears that the G77 and NAM are increasingly irrelevant, or that the North/South divide is becoming less pronounced – fuzzier - I cannot agree with either contention. Looking at the Second and Fifth Committees of the GA, where the G77 is most active, we found that the differences in priorities and perspectives between the North and South continue to undermine international negotiations and contribute to a large extent to the GA not being as relevant as it should be. To overcome this, I believe that a better understanding of North/South differences, coupled with more coordinated attention from NGOs and support from the public at large is urgently required.