

# Book review John Burley

## Reasons for hope: life as an economist in the United Nations by Richard Jolly

### Coming soon

Richard Jolly can certainly write with authority on economists in the United Nations. His memoirs recall the prophetic words of Gunnar Myrdal, the eminent Swedish economist and Nobel laureate, in 1956. A UN economist, according to the then Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), should be “a free and independent scientific agent ... guided only by the inherited and established standards of the profession, without sideward glances at what would be politically opportune ... [Economic] research ... has a clearly practical purpose – in this case ... to serve the general aim of increasing rationality in the national and international policies of member countries”.

Myrdal was writing about his colleagues in the research division of the young ECE. But he could have been referring to the future Richard Jolly, for Richard is one of the very select few British economists at the United Nations who have truly left their mark. Sydney Dell and Hans Singer are two others who come immediately to mind.

Following his first-class economics degree from Cambridge, Richard had to decide what to do. His evangelical Christian beliefs at the time led him to become a conscientious objector to military service. The two years he consequently spent in community development in the deprived district of Baringo in Kenya were decisive: his experiences there working with very poor people including women and children, in very difficult circumstances, “changed my understandings, my beliefs, my ambitions and indeed my whole life: this is now clear looking back, but I had no idea of these changes” at the time. His purpose in life was now to work for the advancement of people in post-colonial Africa or elsewhere. In order to do so, he realized he had to understand development. This

took him to do graduate studies at Yale, where he fell under the spell of Dudley Seers, another eminent British economist who was then a Visiting Fellow. He also met his future wife Alison, an evolutionary primatologist who went on to do the first field studies of Madagascar lemurs.

Dudley Seers made him see that development was much more than simple growth in per capita GDP. What really mattered were structural factors affecting the economy as a whole – especially the nature and impact of inequalities – and the apparently non-economic factors such as access to education and health services that deeply affect the quality of life. Richard had seen this in real life in Baringo: now it all made theoretical sense.

Men with missions are often suspect: not so with Richard. His causes in life have been the highest ethical and moral purposes of a professional economist.

His memoirs recall his early rich and diverse professional life: education and manpower planning in Africa; a study with Seers of newly revolutionary Cuba’s economic strategies; development planning in copper-rich Zambia and oil-rich Abu Dhabi; teaching and research on development at the newly established Institute for Development Studies where Richard succeeded Dudley Seers as Director. Then came the world employment programme with ILO, and the recommendations for a “basic needs” approach to development in Kenya and elsewhere. Shades of the MDGs and SDGs.

In retrospect, these were all preparations for his later life in the United Nations. At UNICEF, he produced the first credible international rejection of so-called adjustment programmes, where belt-tightening was imposed by the IMF

and the World Bank on the backs of the poor. Jim Grant and Richard Jolly were extraordinarily effective together, as I can personally vouch as I was in the UN Director-General’s Office at the time. Then Richard oversaw several of the UNDP Human Development Reports covering poverty, growth, sustainable consumption, inequality, globalization and, especially, human rights. And after his non-retirement, Richard was heavily involved in writing and directing several of the publications of the UN Intellectual History Project: 17 volumes were eventually published on all those ideas and concepts originating in the UN that “changed the world”.

In a series of delightfully written vignettes, Richard explains in his memoirs the different chapters of his life – what he did and why. It is a splendid story of what economists can do in the UN.

Intellectual consistency was never Richard’s problem: throughout his life from Baringo onwards, Richard firmly stuck to his view that the world can be made a better place and that effective multilateral cooperation is both possible and essential. Characteristically, his memoirs make no mention of his knighthood for services to international development nor to his many other awards. Writing at a time when optimism is in short supply, the memoirs are a joy to read.

