

It is easy to produce evidence that at times the United Nations is a centre for noisy discord, a sterile international debating society. Taken in isolation, some of the resolutions of the General Assembly and other organs appear frivolous or irrelevant. Such resolutions may, however, be steps in a long, indirect process by which the member states gradually define a problem or sharpen an issue and simultaneously grope their way towards a solution. A prime example of the process is the way in which the United Nations has dealt with the problem of economic development – a major preoccupation of the organization for the 30 years it has been in existence. Millions of words have been spoken and written on it, thousands of hours have been devoted to discussing it, and hundreds of resolutions have been adopted; the problem has been defined and redefined; and there has been a gradual evolution in the general strategy and the particular tactics for attacking the problem.

Some of the successes of the United Nations are achieved without any formal action being taken. Debates may serve to clarify an issue and lead to a better understanding of a problem. Even more important may be what goes on behind the scenes; a fruitful decision is almost invariably the product of consultation among representatives of regional and other groupings, whereas a decision taken after an angry confrontation between an inflexible majority and a determined minority is rarely of lasting value. The organization does, indeed, serve as a centre where actions of nations may be harmonized if there is a sufficient mutual interest to induce the flexibility, the spirit of compromise, that is necessary if actions are to be harmonized. The very existence of the United Nations, where national representatives may be called on to defend their governments' actions, exerts a salutary influence on national governments. Participation in meetings of United Nations bodies educates and broadens the outlook of political leaders and government officials, and has a subtle influence on habits of thought. The organization provides concrete, physical centres where national representatives meet one another and frequently resolve bilateral issues that might otherwise have grown