

Rubens Ricupero

Mr. Moderator, Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am not one of the happy few who had the privilege to have worked closely with Dr. Gamani Corea like many of those colleagues we see around this table. I cannot refrain from remarking at the outset that there is no better proof of the lasting mark that our dear friend, the late Gamani Corea, left than the presence here of so many of his close collaborators, of the people who worked with him or under him and who travelled from distant places to be among us today. This is not something that happens every day and it is in itself a tribute without words.

If it is true that in philosophy we all stand upon the shoulders of giants who came before us, then I can also say that I enjoyed the privilege of standing upon the shoulders of giants like Dr. Prebisch, Dr. Perez Guerrero, Dr. Gamani Corea. In my time at UNCTAD, I could sense every day how much of this organization is due to their vision, to their efforts, to their gifts.

Gamani used to come quite often to Geneva and every time he would call on me. For one hour or two we would chat about the past, and the challenges of the present and of the future. The message I want to convey today is something that remained with me as a legacy of those conversations.

After the two initial attempts at creating UNCTAD, first by Raul Prebisch and then by Perez Guerrero, the organization was still looking for a permanent identity and there was no assurances that it would survive the conferences of Geneva and New Delhi. My conviction is that it was Gamani who consolidated the organization because he had the wisdom of understanding what was behind the apparently arid legal problem of the role of UNCTAD within the United Nations organization.

UNCTAD had been created as a subsidiary body of the General Assembly of the United Nations. For some people, that was seen as a sort of minor, diminished status as compared to the independent specialized agencies that had their own processes of choosing their Secretary General or Director General, which also had their own budgetary processes and for all practical purposes were almost completely independent from New York in administrative matters. The aspiration of UNCTAD becoming a specialized agency had always been present in the mind of some well-intentioned people.

There were others who thought likewise but with intentions that were not so pure or positive, who did not want to improve matters but, on the contrary, would like to see UNCTAD less well protected against the pressure of the powers to be. I am not imagining things. It is enough to read what Professor Richard Cooper, for instance, wrote on the history of international economic organizations to understand that many never concealed their inconformity with the fact that every member of the United Nations General Assembly had to share the burden for UNCTAD's existence even when they did not like the work the organization was doing. The reason was simple: being a subsidiary body of the UN General Assembly, UNCTAD had become intrinsically indissociable from the United Nations.

When Gamani was UNCTAD's Secretary General in the middle of the 1970s there was a moment when it was offered to him that UNCTAD could become a specialized agency. Those were brilliant, golden days where everything seemed to go the developing countries' way after the two oil shocks. For a moment there was even an illusion that there had been a sort of change in the correlation of forces. Others, in UNIDO, for instance, accepted the offer believing it would make them stronger and more prestigious.

Gamani had the wisdom of turning the offer down. In doing that Gamani consolidated the basis for something that is much more important than administrative independence,

something that is, to this day, the unique characteristic of UNCTAD: its role as a source of independence and integrity of critical thought in the field of development. If UNCTAD wants to remain the voice of those who have no voice, the poorest amongst the poor, the vulnerable, it should never forget that there will be a price to be paid.

When we say that we pride ourselves - I still speak as a former member of UNCTAD - of thinking outside of the box, of being ahead of the curve, we know that we will have to pay a price. As Keynes himself said "economists will rather be wrong in the mainstream than to be right out of it". The price to be paid is pressure, threats, the denial of material resources.

It was Gamani who gave us the guarantee that we would be protected because we were linked to the democratic ground of the international community, to the grass root process of the UN which is the General Assembly. It may not have too much power like the Security Council but it has the highest degree of legitimacy because it is the uttermost expression of the universality of the planet. In maintaining our role as a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly we were able to keep our integrity.

Let me just finish by saying that for all of us who cherish Gamani Corea's legacy, perhaps the most valuable part of that legacy is the fact that UNCTAD remains to this day the moral and intellectual conscience of development. It will only remain so if it resists the temptation to become a part of the mainstream, a very strong and permanent temptation. If you say what others more powerful want you to say, then you may get some rewards but you will have lost your soul.

Thank you very much!