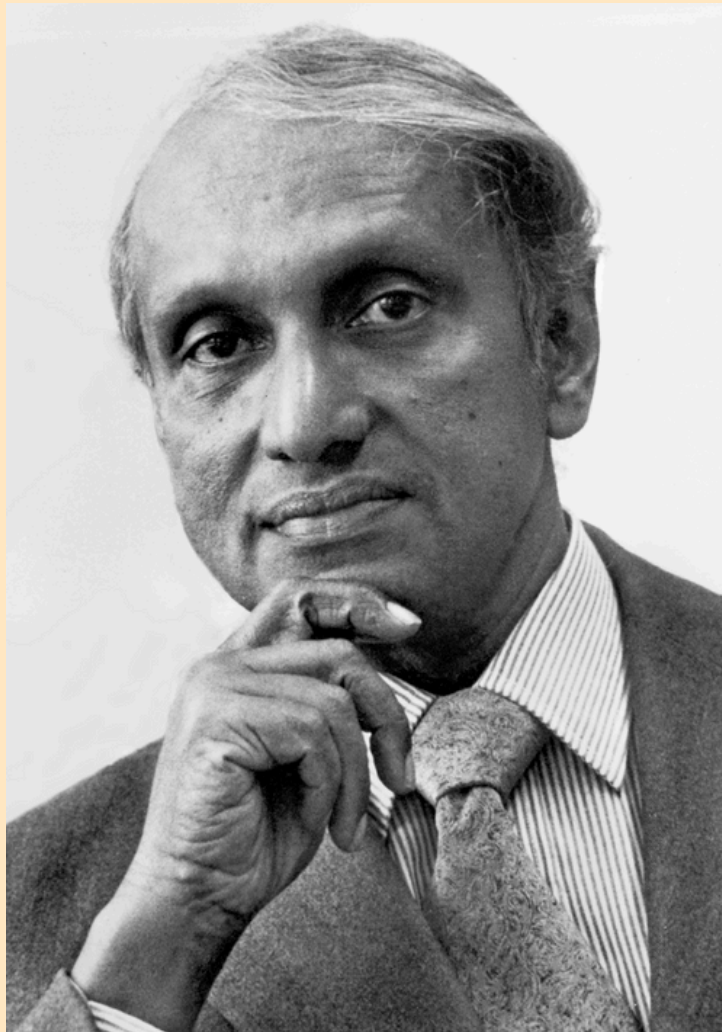




Gamani Corea and his Enduring Legacy for the Global South



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1. Introduction

Gamani Corea was a statesman, diplomat, economist and an intellectual giant of the global South. The ideas and institutions he built and promoted over an illustrious career have played important roles in furthering the cause of developing countries in their quest for sustainable development and a just and equitable international order.

Corea is perhaps best known for his visionary leadership of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, now rebranded as UN Trade and Development) as its third Secretary-General (S-G) between 1974-1984. Equally important was his seminal work in identifying and addressing the structural inequalities present in the world economy; and his advocacy for a new international economic order (NIEO), which continues to resonate in the current resurgence of the global South.

The new and innovative ideas on structural reform, commodity stabilization, sovereign debt relief, and collective self-reliance put forward by Corea reflected the contemporary realities and challenges of his time. Yet, the very same ideas have retained their relevance over the years as the developing world faces increasing inequality, heightened trade tensions and increasing fragmentation in global governance and the multilateral system.

To realise his vision of a more equitable global order, Corea advanced policies aimed at supporting developing countries and ensuring they realised the actual value from the export of their natural resources and commodities. He introduced the Integrated Programme for Commodities and was the prime exponent for the establishment of the Common Fund for Commodities.

A strong lifelong advocate for cooperation among developing countries, Corea also sought to reinforce unity among the nations of the South and build consensus for adopting common positions in multilateral negotiations, most notably through the role he played in the creation of the Group of 77 and China (G77).

For the South Centre, Corea's active participation in the South Commission, and later as a member and Chair of the South Centre Board, was vital in the shaping of its institutional values and philosophies. His work on addressing the sovereign debt of developing countries was another important accomplishment.

It is evident that Corea was prescient in his analyses and insights on global developments in times of flux. In his address on the 20th anniversary of UNCTAD in 1984, Corea emphasised,

“the changed atmosphere—the mounting political tensions, the commitment of massive resources to armaments, the environment of global economic recession and crisis, of inflation and unemployment, of payments problems, and of the slowing down of world economic growth. This is not an environment that has proved conducive to

multilateral approaches. It has indeed seen the dangerous weakening of multilateralism, of international economic co-operation, and of the whole institutional system which embodies these objectives”¹.

More than four decades later, his words could just as well be describing the current multilateral and geo-political situation facing countries and international organisations.

On the occasion of his birth centenary on 4 November 2025, this paper revisits some of Gamani Corea’s most notable contributions to promoting the cause of global South countries at the multilateral level, and considers his legacy and enduring relevance in the current international context.

After the introduction, Part 2 delves into some of Corea’s experiences, activities and accomplishments over his career, and their significance in the current times. Part 3 then offers an insight into his important role in the establishment and operationalisation of the South Centre; while the final part provides some concluding reflections on his legacy today and how Corea’s ideas continue to influence efforts for sustainable development in the global South.

2. Contemporary contexts and notable accomplishments

It is hard to overstate the far reaching impact of Gamani Corea in the 1960s and 70s, even before he had taken up his position with UNCTAD. For instance, he participated in expert group discussions in 1965 that led to the creation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)’s new international reserve currency, the Special Drawing Rights (SDRs). In 1969, Corea participated in negotiations to establish an international agreement on tea. He also served as the Chairman of the United Nations (UN) Cocoa Conference in 1972 which resulted in a price stabilization agreement for cocoa. He was closely associated with the UN Committee on Development Planning between 1965 - 1974, first as Member and then as its Chairman. He was also appointed as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the UN Conference on Human Environment, which eventually led to the creation of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

Corea’s term at UNCTAD commenced on 1 April 1974, at a time when he notes “a degree of malaise in respect of efforts to strengthen international development cooperation... there was already the beginnings of a dramatic change in the international economic situation which provided a new canvas for the work of UNCTAD over a significant part of [his tenure]”².

That decade was further shaped by some important factors that influenced major policy developments. First, the 1971 monetary crisis which caused the United States to de-link the dollar from gold; second, the success of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) countries in 1973, which showed that commodities producers could manage the price of their own raw materials³; and third, the considerable expansion in the flow of trade,

¹ Gamani Corea, “The Challenge of Change”, Address by UNCTAD Secretary-General at the commemorative meeting on the 20th anniversary of UNCTAD, in *The History of UNCTAD 1964-1984* (United Nations Publication, 1985).

² Gamani Corea, *My Memoirs* (Gamani Corea Foundation, 2008), p. 367.

³ G. Sacerdoti, “New International Economic Order (NIEO)”, Max Planck Encyclopaedia of International Law, Oxford, September 2015. Available from <https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1542>.

technology and capital among developing countries, leading to greater possibilities for South-South cooperation⁴.

Many of his most notable achievements took place during his time at UNCTAD from 1974-1984, also termed as ‘Corea’s decade’, with a number of important, legally-binding agreements reached under his leadership. Recalling Corea’s legacy and achievements in 2014, then UNCTAD S-G Dr. Kituyi highlighted that,

*“his tenure [at UNCTAD] was underpinned by a vision for the organization as both an intellectual leader as well as a centre for serious negotiations on matters of global importance. Debt relief was pushed; the Common Fund was established; the Global System of Trade Preferences among Developing Countries (GSTP) was launched; negotiations on a code of conduct for the transfer of technology began; and the discussion on a new international economic order – the mothership for all these initiatives – moved ahead”*⁵.

Corea also remained a steadfast proponent of the global South throughout these years, providing invaluable support to the G77 countries “in their quest for upliftment and better conditions of living through the development of their resources, the exchange of goods and skills but without encumbering their dignity as a people”⁶.

This part explores five areas where Corea’s legacy is vibrant and visible today, namely: UNCTAD, the NIEO, the work on commodities, the G77, and addressing the sovereign debt of developing countries.

2.1. UNCTAD

Corea’s association with UNCTAD extends to even before its creation. In 1963, while still working in Sri Lanka’s Central Bank, Corea was invited to join a group of experts who would support Raúl Prebisch, then Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), in the preparation of the UN’s first conference on trade and development, or UNCTAD I.

Gamani Corea worked with Raúl Prebisch to foster ideas that eventually formed UNCTAD’s core philosophy on international development issues, seeking to providing a critique and alternatives to the ideas being put forth by the Bretton Woods Institutions; and providing developing countries with necessary development orientation and support.

Since it was taking place just after the wave of Third World decolonisation, Corea was acutely aware of the prevailing political contexts for UNCTAD I. Reflecting on the conference’s theme of ‘Trade and Aid’, Corea observed that, “Trade was certainly preferable to aid on political and even economic grounds, since aid often gave rise, among other drawbacks, to external indebtedness”⁷. He further noted that Prebisch’s report (titled *Towards a new trade policy for development*) highlighted the principal actions needed for both trade and aid, and taken

⁴ South Commission, *The Challenge to the South* (1990), p. 70.

⁵ Dr. Mukhisa Kituyi, “Gamani Corea: An embodiment of the confident South”, in Martin Khor et al. (eds.), *A Tribute to Gamani Corea: His Life, Work and Legacy* (South Centre, 2014), pp. 13-14.

⁶ Letter by Amb. Hortencio Brillantes, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Philippines to the UN and other International Organisations in Geneva and Coordinator of the G-77, dated 16 January 1985, in *Letters to Dr. Gamani Corea on the occasion of his relinquishment of office as Secretary-General of UNCTAD* (UNCTAD, February 1985).

⁷ Gamani Corea, *My Memoirs* (Gamani Corea Foundation, 2008), p. 268.

together, represented a design for a new external environment for development and a new agenda for international development cooperation⁸.

Corea was part of the Sri Lankan delegation that arrived in Geneva to take part in UNCTAD I negotiations, and played a prominent role throughout the following weeks of negotiations. He made some pertinent observations on his experiences there, noting that,

“The impact of the first UNCTAD conference was in terms of a number of major developments that emerged as a result of it. First, the conference resulted in a framing of comprehensive agenda for international economic action and reform around which the developing countries were able to unite. This agenda included specific proposals for each of the key areas of concern to developing countries, commodities, trade and manufacture, services, resource flows and so on. These issues have continued despite the need for adaptation and recasting to shape the negotiation platform of developing countries”⁹.

Corea considered that the creation of UNCTAD as a permanent organization ranked as perhaps the major achievement of the Geneva conference, with developing countries’ concerns forming the core of UNCTAD’s work ever since.

As Secretary-General, Corea was responsible for UNCTAD IV – VI, which took place in Nairobi (1976), Manila (1979), and Belgrade (1983) respectively. Of particular importance was the adoption of the Integrated Programme for Commodities (IPC) in Nairobi, which kicked off a multi-year negotiation process for agreements on commodities (explored further below).

UNCTAD, as the institution that Corea played a key role in shaping from its very beginning, celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2024, and still plays a role in advancing multilateral discussions on trade and development. In October 2025, UNCTAD convened the sixteenth iteration of its conference in Geneva, with the theme of ‘Shaping the future: Driving economic transformation for equitable, inclusive and sustainable development’¹⁰. Its outcome document emphasises the continued importance of UNCTAD for developing countries, while also calling for it to be more responsive, rapid and relevant as the world changes and adjusts to new economic and geo-political realities.

2.2. *The New International Economic Order (NIEO)*

One month after Corea assumed office, on 1 May 1974 the UN General Assembly met for its sixth special session to adopt the landmark ‘Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order’¹¹. The NIEO envisioned a reform of the global order so that it resulted in a complete transformation of the international economic system. At the same time, it emphasized the importance of mutual benefit, interdependence, and cooperation among countries¹².

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 277-280.

¹⁰ UNCTAD 16. Available from <https://unctad.org/unctad16>.

¹¹ UN General Assembly, Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order, A/RES/3201(S-VI), 1 May 1974.

¹² Antony Anghie, “Legal Aspects of the New International Economic Order”, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, Vol. 6, no. 1 (2015), pp. 145-158. Available from <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hum.2015.0016>.

Corea was a key proponent of the NIEO, which reflected two strands of his thinking, namely the need for structural change and the insistence on collective action¹³. Based on these twin precepts, the NIEO sought to address many of the structural inequities of international trade, finance, commodities, and access to technology that developing countries were faced with.

The OPEC oil price hike in 1973 also played a key role in shaping Corea's thinking on the NIEO, as he observed that "the political significance of the OPEC action was such that the dividing line at the UN Special Session was not between oil importers and oil exporters, but between the developing countries which were pursuing an NIEO and the developed countries which were the guardians of the status quo"¹⁴.

For developing countries, the NIEO was an effort to reform the international order which had failed to address the concerns of the vast majority of the world's population¹⁵. Corea echoed these sentiments, perceiving the call for a NIEO as reflecting "the insistence of the countries of the third world on belonging to, and being treated as, an integral part of the global order. It is a reflection of their unwillingness to continue to remain on the periphery of such an order"¹⁶.

The NIEO has evolved over the five decades since its adoption and led to important outcomes for global South countries and communities, including paving the way for the Declaration on the Right to Development in 1986. The most recent UN resolution on the issue however notes that many aspects of the NIEO have not been implemented and that, consequently, many developing countries continue to face significant challenges, including vulnerability to external shocks and lack of adequate representation in global economic governance¹⁷.

While some NIEO elements found space in subsequent multilateral discussions, its overall implementation has stalled. The UN S-G's latest report on the NIEO underscores that despite significant development progress in some developing countries, many others still struggle to overcome gaps and access the support they need¹⁸. Far-reaching and effective multilateral reforms are necessary to fix the systemic flaws in the existing international order and institutions to make them fit for purpose.

Even at its 50th anniversary, the NIEO continues to be a clarion call to the international community for highlighting gaps in global governance and engaging in the comprehensive reform of the international architecture for global governance, finance, trade and sustainable development, so that it produces just and equitable outcomes for all.

2.3. *Corea Plan and the Common Fund for Commodities*

Getting a new deal for developing countries in the area of 'raw materials and commodities of export interest' was seen by Corea as being core to the NIEO. Its zenith came in the form of the

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka, "The Life and Thought of Gamani Corea, 1925-2013" (2014). Available from <https://mfa.gov.lk/en/life-and-thought-of-gamani-corea-1925-2013/>.

¹⁴ Dr. Saman Kelegama, "Gamani Corea and commodity price stabilization", in Martin Khor et al. (eds.), *A Tribute to Gamani Corea: His Life, Work and Legacy* (South Centre, 2014), p. 41.

¹⁵ Antony Anghie, "Rethinking International Law: A TWAIL Retrospective", *European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 34, no. 1 (2023), pp. 7–112.

¹⁶ Gamani Corea, "UNCTAD and the New International Economic Order", *International Affairs* pp, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Apr. 1977), pp. 177-187.

¹⁷ UN General Assembly, Towards a New International Economic Order, A/RES/79/215, 23 December 2024.

¹⁸ UN, Towards a New International Economic Order: Report of the Secretary-General, A/79/320, 26 July 2024. Available from <https://docs.un.org/en/A/79/320>.

Integrated Programme for Commodities – later known as the Corea Plan – which was adopted at UNCTAD IV in 1976¹⁹.

Before then, commodities trade used to be individually considered, based on *ad hoc* arrangements dominated by major industrialized countries and private interests. There was no mechanism for commodity price stabilisation or supporting producer countries. Even the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) adopted in 1947 focused on manufactured goods and tariff liberalisation, leaving commodities outside its scope.

Corea's innovation was in looking at commodities as a whole, rather than continuing to approach commodity negotiations in a fragmented and *ad hoc* fashion, bringing them under a common framework of principles and policy objectives²⁰. Corea was also the foremost champion for the establishment of a Common Fund for Commodities as part of the Programme. This Fund was designed to stabilize volatile commodity prices and provide producers with greater security in global markets.

The negotiations on the Common Fund commenced in 1977 but a final agreement only became possible in June 1980 after the conclusion of UNCTAD V in Manila in 1979 with the unanimous adoption of the Articles of Agreement of the Fund. The ratification of the agreement took even longer²¹, with the Fund eventually being operationalised in 1989²². For Corea, the Common Fund was the key element of the Programme and the final agreement on its establishment represented a decisive breakthrough in its implementation²³.

However, Corea was under no misconceptions regarding the difficulties awaiting future agreements on commodities, noting that,

*“The success of the Common Fund negotiations was not, however, illustrative of a strong commitment on the part of the international community to schemes of intervention in the arena of commodity trade. The motivations that resulted in the agreement were mixed. The developing countries rallied around the Integrated Program for Commodities and the Common Fund as broad instruments of benefit to their trade in commodities, but the specifics of international commodity agreements in the new setting had yet to engage their attention, their preparedness for the task of utilizing the Common Fund, and indeed the integrative program in general, had yet to lead to schemes and instruments of relevance to individual products in countries. A new framework had indeed been created, but there was yet no groundwork to determine the way in which it would be utilized”*²⁴.

Over the next few years, multilateral agreement was reached on specific commodities like coffee, cocoa, sugar, tin, jute, tea, timber and rubber; though none have had much lasting effect. Yet, commodity dependence has remained part of the economy of most developing

¹⁹ UN, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Fourth Session, Nairobi, 5-31 May 1976. Available from https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/td218vol1_en.pdf.

²⁰ Gamani Corea, “Creating a Framework to Strengthen and Stabilize International Commodity Markets”, in Alan K. Henrikson (ed.), *Negotiating World Order: The Artisanry and Architecture of Global Diplomacy* (Scholarly Resources Inc., 1986), pp. 167 – 180.

²¹ Gamani Corea, *My Memoirs* (Gamani Corea Foundation, 2008), p. 402.

²² Common Fund for Commodities, Official website. Available from <https://www.common-fund.org/>.

²³ Gamani Corea, *Need For Change: Towards the New International Economic Order* (Oxford, 1980) p. ix-x.

²⁴ Gamani Corea, *My Memoirs* (Gamani Corea Foundation, 2008), p. 407.

countries, with few prominent exceptions. Recent UNCTAD data shows that during 2021-2023, 95 of 143 developing economies remained commodity dependent²⁵.

The current focus on critical minerals and initiatives towards beneficiation at or close to source for capturing more of their value added reflects Corea's priorities for commodity producers. The recent efforts for securing critical and rare-earth mineral supplies also shows the importance of producer countries gaining more value from their natural resources and moving up in global value chains. For instance, countries like Indonesia have taken policy initiatives to increase the value they derive from their nickel reserves, and foster industrial development by setting up factories to build nickel-based batteries for electric vehicles²⁶.

2.4. The G77 and South-South cooperation

Corea was an active proponent of enhancing cooperation among Southern countries for fostering solidarity and presenting a united front in multilateral negotiations, and played a vital role in the establishment of the G77.

Just before arriving for UNCTAD I, Corea recalls he was very enthused and encouraged to learn of "the coming together of the countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia, which made up a vast majority of mankind and commanded a decisive voting majority in the UN. This was the first time that a systematic voting bloc of this kind had come into being"²⁷. Corea was included as a member of the G77 drafting group and prepared the document that was adopted as their first ever Declaration at the end of UNCTAD I. The G77 continues to operate as the largest grouping of countries in the UN to this day, and recently also celebrated its 60th anniversary²⁸ alongside UNCTAD.

Over the years, Corea was clear about the need for effective unity of the G77, emphasising consensus-building among G77 members, especially while negotiating with developed countries to present common positions. He noted that,

*"It is easy for the G77 to establish their unity in pursuit of broad goals and objectives; it is easy for them to unite in order to ask for better prices for commodities, for higher levels of aid, for an easing of the debt burden, and so on. But it is less easy for the G77 to sustain this unity when it comes to implementing these goals, when it comes to agreeing on mechanisms or modalities by which these objectives could be realized"*²⁹.

Corea remained a strong supporter of South-South cooperation throughout his life, emphasising that it should "be seen as an integral part of a global economic system and an

²⁵ UNCTAD, The State of Commodity Dependence 2025, UNCTAD/DITC/COM/2025/3, 21 July 2025. Available from <https://unctad.org/publication/state-commodity-dependence-2025>.

²⁶ Julian Isaac, "Indonesia accelerates EV battery industry with US\$5.9 B integrated nickel project", *Indonesia Business Post*, 7 August 2025. Available from <https://indonesiabusinesspost.com/4938/energy-and-resources/indonesia-accelerates-ev-battery-industry-with-us-5-9-b-integrated-nickel-project>.

²⁷ Gamani Corea, *My Memoirs* (Gamani Corea Foundation, 2008), p. 277.

²⁸ See: Danish, "The Group of 77 and China commemorates its 60th Anniversary in Geneva", *SouthNews* No. 504, South Centre, 30 September 2024. Available from <https://mailchi.mp/southcentre/southnews-the-group-of-77-and-china-commemorates-its-60th-anniversary-in-geneva>.

²⁹ Gamani Corea, *Need For Change: Towards the New International Economic Order* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 18-19.

essential element of a global strategy for development”³⁰. This is also echoed by the South Commission, emphasising that,

*“South-South cooperation offers developing countries a strategic means for pursuing relatively autonomous path to development suited to the needs and aspirations of the people (...) Acting separately, Third World countries will also be in an extremely weak bargaining position in dealing with the well-organized groupings of developed countries or transnational corporations. Hence, solidarity and co-operation are imperative for the countries of the South”*³¹.

Seven decades after the landmark Bandung conference in 1955, the landscape of South-South cooperation has expanded significantly as developing countries have increased their capacities as both providers and recipients of international development cooperation³². Of particular note is the setting up of institutions and networks for promoting developing countries’ interests, including the South Centre and the New Development Bank; as well as regional initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) which promote collective self-reliance among Southern countries.

This is also reflected in the rise of *BRICS* countries on the global stage and their growing influence on multilateral affairs, most recently encapsulated in their outcome document titled ‘Strengthening Global South Cooperation for More Inclusive and Sustainable Governance’³³. These developments further affirm the relevance of Corea’s aspirations that developing countries act together for stronger multilateralism, a fairer international order and for driving global economic growth and sustainable development.

2.5. Sovereign Debt

The 1970s were a tumultuous time for the sovereign debt of developing countries, with a large expansion in international commercial bank loans to developing countries³⁴. This eventually resulted in unsustainable levels of sovereign debt in developing countries and led to dramatic decline in their economic growth by the late 70s.

Faced with the prospect of the failure of the Second UN Development Decade (1971-1980), Gamani Corea made an audacious proposal at UNCTAD in 1978 for addressing the unsustainable sovereign debt of developing countries and providing relief. This eventually led to a resolution being passed where creditor countries agreed to consider providing debt relief to some of the poorest countries. This soon came to be converted into action with the amount of debt relief provided amounting to over \$6 billion in aggregate, with more than half in the form of

³⁰ Gamani Corea, “UNCTAD and the New International Economic Order”, *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Apr. 1977), pp. 177-187.

³¹ South Commission, *The Challenge to the South* (1990), pp. 17-18.

³² See: Danish, *Seven Decades After Bandung: The evolving landscape for South-South and Triangular Cooperation*, South Centre Research Paper 225 (12 September 2025). Available from <https://www.southcentre.int/research-paper-225-12-september-2025/>.

³³ See: BRICS, Rio de Janeiro Declaration - Strengthening Global South Cooperation for a More Inclusive and Sustainable Governance, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 6 July 2025. Available from <https://brics.br/en/news/brics-summit-signs-historic-commitment-in-rio-for-more-inclusive-and-sustainable-governance>.

³⁴ South Commission, *The Challenge to the South* (1990), p. 55.

debt cancellation³⁵. It was the first instance of a collective write-off of official debt by creditor countries, and Sri Lanka was herself a beneficiary of this effort.

After this outcome, it was thought by Corea that the role of UNCTAD as a forum for negotiations and action had strengthened³⁶. However, this achievement of UNCTAD in the area of sovereign debt has never been repeated, with discussions having since moved to other fora like the Paris Club and the Group of Twenty (G20).

Corea continued working on sovereign debt issues after UNCTAD, assuming the Chair of the Ad Hoc Panel of Economic Experts on Third World Debt convened by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), to propose actions on sovereign debt reform. The Panel's report was submitted to the South African Presidency of the 12th NAM Summit, held in Durban in 1998, and was a significant step in the evolution of approaches to debt relief for developing countries. The Panel's recommendations also influenced the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative of the Bretton Woods Institutions³⁷.

There are signs of a new debt crisis emerging for more developing countries, with around 35 low-income countries in or close to debt distress. Recent data show that global public debt has already surpassed US\$ 100 trillion in 2024³⁸, and is projected to exceed 100 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP) by 2029, led by advanced and emerging market economies³⁹. Already, a number of developing countries, particularly in Africa, are paying more to service external debts than on health and education.

Corea's influence on promoting collective action for debt relief is also visible in the South Commission report which considered that the debt crisis provided an example of a missed opportunity for collective action by developing countries, which might have allowed their own peoples to suffer less and could have resulted in some improvements to the international financial system⁴⁰.

Demands for collective solutions for effective debt relief were heard once again at the recent fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) in Seville, but ultimately, its outcome was limited to initiating an intergovernmental process at the UN that would make recommendations for closing gaps in the international debt architecture and explore options to address debt sustainability⁴¹.

³⁵ Sidney Dell (ed.), *Policies for Development: Essays in Honour of Gamani Corea* (Macmillan Press, 1988), pp. xi – xv.

³⁶ Gamani Corea, *My Memoirs* (Gamani Corea Foundation, 2008), p. 408.

³⁷ Gerassimos D. Arsenis, "Gamani's role on global management, interdependence of money, finance and trade, and the debt burden of developing countries", in Martin Khor et al. (eds.), *A Tribute to Gamani Corea: His Life, Work and Legacy* (South Centre, 2014), pp. 68-77.

³⁸ UNCTAD, *A World of Debt*, 2025. Available from <https://unctad.org/publication/world-of-debt>.

³⁹ See: Kristalina Georgieva, "Opportunity in a Time of Change", IMF, 8 October 2025. Available from <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2025/10/08/sp100825-annual-meetings-2025-curtain-raiser>.

⁴⁰ South Commission, *The Challenge to the South* (1990), p. 71.

⁴¹ See: Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) Outcome Document, para. 50(f). Available from <https://financing.desa.un.org/ffd4/outcome>.

3. Importance for the South Centre

Corea was a leading actor in the creation of the South Centre and can be considered as one of its ‘founding fathers’⁴². He was one of the 29 members of the South Commission which functioned from 1987 to 1990 under the leadership of President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania.

Gamani Corea was a strong and early proponent of the need for an organisation that would provide developing countries with the intellectual and technical analysis in multilateral discussions, a role originally played and then abdicated by UNCTAD⁴³. Already in 1980, Corea was expressing the view that,

*“the developing countries would benefit by the establishment of their own secretariat; I believe that there would be no conflict between the role of UNCTAD as an institutional hammer, so to speak, for the solution of development problems, and the need for the developing countries to receive assistance from their own organs for tactical and substantive purposes”*⁴⁴.

At the South Commission, he strongly advocated for creating such an entity, arguing that the “Secretariat of the Commission should be made permanent in one way or another, to serve as a focal point for the continuation of substantive work in respect of North-South relations and other aspects of development”. He described the eventual decision to establish the South Centre as “both a new beginning and a legacy from the earlier days”⁴⁵.

Following the establishment of the Centre as an outcome of and successor to the South Commission, Corea became a member of the South Centre Board from 1995 to 2002, and was then appointed as the Chair of the Board, a position he undertook until 2003 when he retired. He was also the Chairman of the Centre’s Policy and Research Committee from 1998-2001 and played important leadership roles in various capacities.

His legacy is also being taken forward in Geneva by the Gamani Corea Forum, which was launched in 2014 to strengthen the intellectual capacity of the G77 and provide its delegates with sustained capacity-building for multilateral negotiations, with its importance being noted in the G-77 Ministerial Declarations to UNCTAD⁴⁶.

His association with the South Commission, and later the South Centre has left an indelible legacy for the institution, carrying on his mission to promote solidarity and cooperation among the countries and peoples of the global South for promoting their equitable and sustainable development, and advancing their collective interests in the multilateral arena.

4. Concluding reflections

Gamani Corea’s most active years took place in the backdrop of the Cold War, with the world divided into rival blocs. Today, we are seeing a shift away from the hyper-globalised, unipolar

⁴² H.E. Benjamin W. Mkapu, “Gamani Corea’s role at the South Centre”, in Martin Khor *et al.* (eds.), *A Tribute to Gamani Corea: His Life, Work and Legacy* (South Centre, 2014), pp. 9-12.

⁴³ See: Vijay Prashad, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (LeftWord Books, 2013).

⁴⁴ Gamani Corea, *Need For Change: Towards the New International Economic Order* (Oxford, 1980), p. 19.

⁴⁵ Gamani Corea, *My Memoirs* (Gamani Corea Foundation, 2008), p. 469.

⁴⁶ Ministerial Declaration of the Group of 77 and China to UNCTAD XV, TD/522, 4 October 2021, para. 63. Available from https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/td522_en.pdf.

world of the last 3 decades, towards increased multipolarity and a renewed focus on the collective agency of the global South.

Yet, the challenges facing the majority of developing countries in those years have persisted and even compounded over the years. While concerns about commodity price stability, once a key aspect of the NIEO, appear to have withered away, others have emerged. The world is increasingly unequal, and gaps such as the global digital divide continue to widen. Yet, the overall picture does not appear to have changed much for developing countries over the intervening decades. Writing in 1980, Corea perceived the issue as follows,

“The crisis facing developing countries has at no time been more critical than at present. In the face of unparalleled payment deficits most developing countries are already being constrained to curtail their development efforts and to slow down the rates of growth of their economies. At the same time, the developed countries see their own problems of recession and inflation as restraining their capacity for international cooperation in development (...) But the problems can hardly be overcome by short-term measures and emergency actions alone. They are a reflection of a deeper malaise in the international economy, a reflection of the changes that have undermined the systems of trade, money, and finance that were established at an earlier time. These issues cannot therefore be evaded, however difficult might be their ultimate solution”⁴⁷.

This description is just as apt for the global economic landscape today. The post-Second World War multilateral order is fragmenting and the UN is being rendered irrelevant, while the Washington Consensus appears to have reached its limit. There are weak or even no outcomes emerging from international conferences and major divergences are persistent among countries in various multilateral fora.

However, the rising importance of developing countries, reflected in groupings such as *BRICS*, suggest that there is once again an opening for realizing Gamani Corea’s vision of increasing the agency of developing countries in global economic governance. However, this requires the global South to mobilise together for achieving their goals and transforming their development prospects.

Corea understood clearly the myriad challenges of collective action of developing countries. Even while at UNCTAD, he observed that the cohesion of developing countries in international fora has weakened, noting that they “individually have been distracted by their own problems, their own vulnerabilities, and as a result the platform of the developing countries on the global stage has suffered gravely”⁴⁸.

Many of the challenges of the South today can only be addressed by the collective political will and action of the South, supported by the institutions of the South. This is particularly true at the multilateral level, where achieving actionable outcomes and their effective implementation remains key to addressing many of the sustainable development priorities of Southern countries. This requires effective international cooperation, both through enhancing South-South cooperation and continuing North-South engagement.

South-South cooperation is the foundation for building solidarity, unity and common positions among developing countries, especially at the multilateral level. Corea himself said that, “If the developing countries are to succeed in the negotiating process in the future, it is imperative that

⁴⁷ Gamani Corea, *Need For Change: Towards the New International Economic Order* (Oxford, 1980), p. xi.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

they maintain this unity because the unity of the developing countries is by and large the most potent and the strongest instrument at their disposal”⁴⁹.

The organisations of the South have a key role to play in this respect. For instance, the South Centre was set up with the aim of, *inter alia*, supporting developing countries in international negotiations. Over the last three decades, it has collaborated with institutions from across developing countries to promote the sharing of knowledge and experiences for mutual learning and developing common points of view for advancing their collective interests.

The resurgence of the global South gives an opportunity to developing countries across regions to build on their historical solidarity and common interests to come together at the multilateral level for effectively addressing existential global challenges like climate change, instead of once again, as Corea remarked “negotiating the size of the zero”⁵⁰.

The second element is the need for continued engagement of the South with the North across different domains. Developing countries still benefit from access to the large markets in advanced economies, as well as the trade and investment flows needed for their economic growth. The ongoing restructuring of global value chains provides an important avenue for countries to diversify their economies and move up for capturing higher value addition.

Such engagement should be further leveraged by developing countries for access to finance and technology, including digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, which can increase their productivity and growth. As the longstanding trans-Atlantic relationship appears to be rupturing further, there is a sense of renewed space for working jointly on global challenges with those developed countries that are still expressing their commitment to multilateralism and dialogue.

Corea himself was forced out of UNCTAD by the advanced economies for his role in giving intellectual support for the G77⁵¹. Yet, as Sidney Dell recalls, it was one of Gamani Corea’s many strengths that he “never became cynical or embittered about the North-South deadlock that faced him continually, and he always retained his confidence in the power of persuasion and in the ultimate victory of reason over unreason”⁵².

Gamani Corea’s birth centenary is therefore a moment to draw lessons, and perhaps more importantly hope, for policymakers, scholars, and diplomats to work together for advancing the common interests of developing countries. His vision of Southern solidarity and unity should continue to guide the responses to contemporary challenges, helping the global South to assert itself once again in shaping fair rules for global governance. Corea’s legacy must be an inspiration for renewed collective action by the global South, which truly ensures that no one gets left behind.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

⁵⁰ Thalif Deen, “Gamani Corea wouldn’t touch top UN job even with a bamboo pole”, *The Sunday Times*, 21 February 2016. Available from <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/160221/sunday-times-2/gamani-corea-wouldnt-touch-top-un-job-even-with-a-bamboo-pole-183643.html>.

⁵¹ Chakravarthi Raghavan, “Gamani Corea: A development visionary and a humanist”, in Martin Khor *et al.* (eds.), *A Tribute to Gamani Corea: His Life, Work and Legacy* (South Centre, 2014), pp. 27-34.

⁵² Sidney Dell (ed.), *Policies for Development: Essays in Honour of Gamani Corea* (Macmillan Press, 1988), pp. xi – xv.

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