

Special Tribute Seminar in Honour of Dr. Gamani Corea

Organised by the South Centre

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Message from UNCTAD Secretary General, delivered by Richark Kozul-Wright

Dr. Mukhisa Kituyi, Secretary-General of UNCTAD wishes to express his deep regrets for being unable to be here today. Unfortunately this Tribute Seminar takes place on the same date as a long-planned mission to Cambodia and India. He very much would have liked to take part, but asked me to join you today and offer some thoughts on his behalf.

After the passing of former Secretary-General Corea last fall, Dr. Kituyi delivered a short eulogy in his honour during a special commemoration ceremony organized by UNCTAD's Trade and Development Board. During that commemoration Dr. Kituyi called Gamani Correa an "embodiment of the confident South."

It is an apt description that is, in part, a reflection of the political drive of the developing world in the two and a half decades from the Bandung Conference to the onset of the debt crisis of the early 1980s. UNCTAD was, of course, very much a product of that confidence. But it also tells us a lot about how Gamani's leadership helped steer a course for UNCTAD that continues to serve as a beacon for us today. His tenure in UNCTAD from 1974 to 1985 was underpinned by a vision for the organisation 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; 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. Looking back, this is quite a list of initiatives launched under his leadership.

Gamani, of course, faced huge challenges in advancing his vision. The Group B demand for impartial and transparent analysis of policy options exposed the difficulties of the secretariat in balancing committed policy advocacy to the cause of development with its impartial advisory role, particularly around contentious issues of global economic governance. Building meaningful consensus today on development challenges faces no less, and perhaps even more, daunting challenges.

More than simply taking up where his predecessors left off, Gamani Corea moved the North-South dialogue in a constructive direction. There have certainly been bumps in the road since then, indeed, the shift towards a neo-liberal development consensus, which began in the final years of Gamani's tenure as Secretary General, has posed profound intellectual and political challenges for UNCTAD. But one lasting consequence is UNCTAD's *Trade and Development Report*, launched by Gamani in 1981. Led by Geri Arsenis, it was a bold response to the World Bank's *World Development Report* established a couple of years earlier and already refocusing the development discussion on "getting prices right", and down-playing the influence of international economic conditions on national policy on the grounds that the prime culprit behind the debt crisis was domestic economic policy errors. This positioning of the World Bank was quickly consolidated around adjustment lending and in so doing opened up the possibility of an alternative approach to interpreting the issue of central concern to UNCTAD – the design of development strategies in an interdependent world of asymmetric economic power relations and distorted international markets.

This approach continues to guide UNCTAD's role as a platform for honest analysis, informal dialogue and consensus building among developed and developing countries. Indeed, it is worth recalling here that even at the height of disagreements between the North and the South during Gamani's tenure, he inspired the respect of no less than Henry Kissinger himself – who encouraged him to stay the course no matter what their intellectual or ideological differences might have been.

It is therefore for his spirit of service to development and to genuine and purposeful North-South dialogue that we honour him today. We keep alive his principles and his aspirations for a better world. He put into practice his dream of an UNCTAD that makes a difference, and we are committed to that dream too.

Gamani Corea's time at UNCTAD may perhaps seem distant, we look back "though a glass darkly", but in important respects the development challenges that motivated Gamani remain familiar to us today: The workings of the global economic system continues to impede the full potential of developing countries; certainly some countries of the South have emerged as vibrant players on the world stage but many others remain constrained in their development ambitions or, worse still, mired in desperation; and the global economic environment is in flux; the hegemon is losing its grip and multilateralism is weakened, casting into uncertainty not only the global balance of interests and power but the search for constructive cooperation on shared challenges across the international community.

Although today the world may have changed - and with it UNCTAD - in the organization itself, Gamani's spirit and legacy live on. UNCTAD remains an intellectual centre of excellence on development thinking in the United Nations system, and in the broader development community. And the quadrennial UNCTAD conference remains the only major UN conference on development that takes place on a regular and permanent basis.

And today, just as in Gamani's time, we have the opportunity to change things for the better. Through the post-2015 process and the forthcoming UNCTAD XIV, we can strive to more effectively address global challenges by marrying bold intellectual thinking with a new spirit of cooperation and consensus in UNCTAD, which is the way that Gamani Corea surely would have wanted. Let us be worthy of his legacy, let us stay the course and persevere.

Thank you very much for your attention