

On the relevance of the work of the development economist Hans Singer (1910-2006)

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SYMPOSIUM ON HANS SINGER
WUPPERTAL, 5 MAY 2025

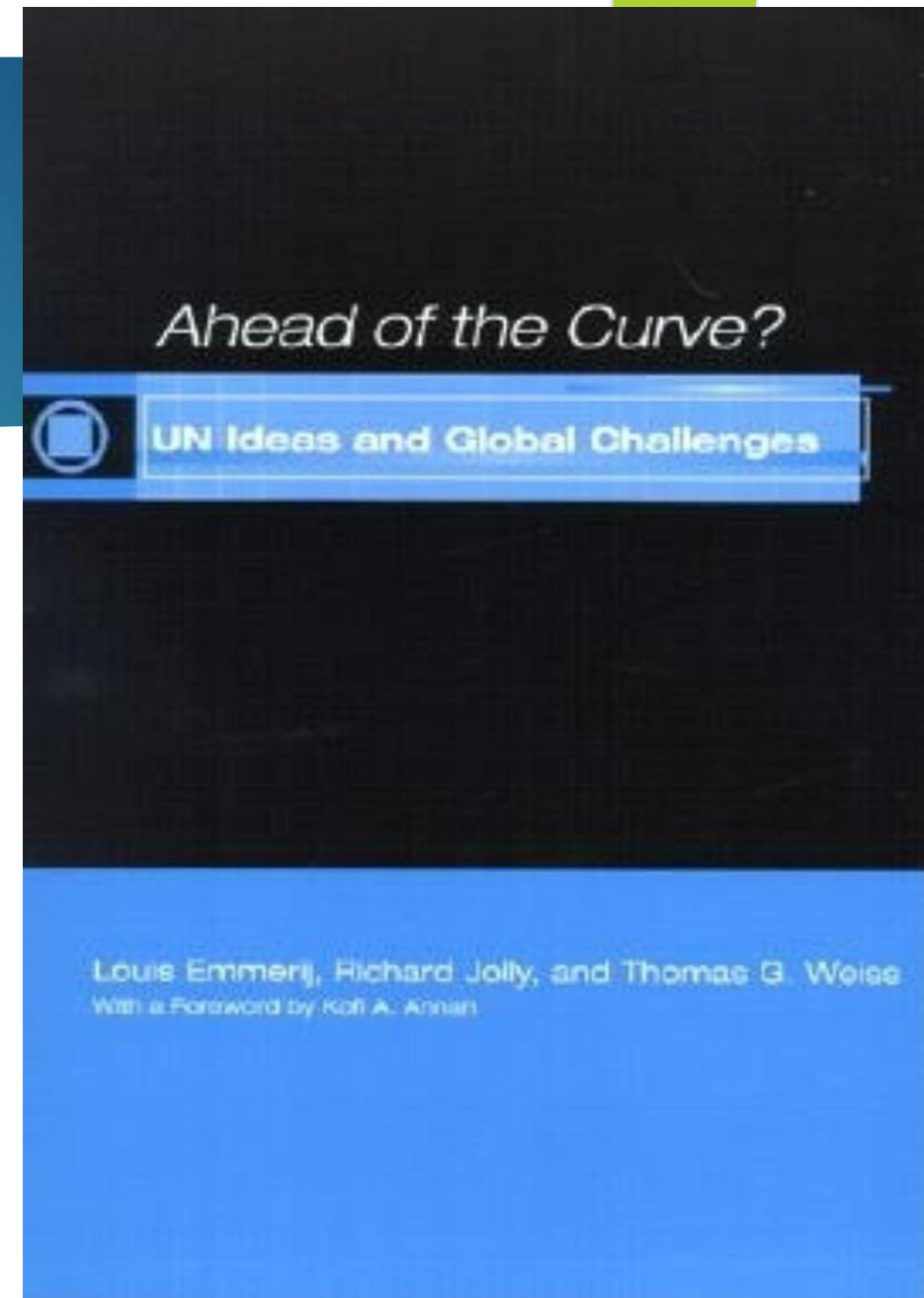


STADT WUPPERTAL



Ideas – their role in the UN

- ▶ UN intellectual history project (Richard Jolly et al.)
 - ▶ Can ideas change the world?
 - ▶ Was/Is the UN „ahead of the curve”
 - ▶ Who produces and conveys ideas?
- ▶ Hans Singer's historical context: optimistic founding years of the UN
 - ▶ Secure peace
 - ▶ Avoid economic recessions/turbulences
 - ▶ Economic and social justice
 - ▶ **Towards a Global welfare state (influenced by UK's Beveridge Plan)!**
- ▶ Hans Singer: one of the founding fathers of development economics
 - ▶ Singer unanimously recognised as a “Pioneer of Development” – ahead of the curve!



Hans Singer's long term influence on the UN

Three ideas ahead of the curve AND where the impact prevails:

- I) Assessment of developing countries as structurally disadvantaged by and vs economically powerful countries - the terms of trade debate and advocacy for commodity agreements) **UNCTAD**
- II) Analysis of the informal sector (unregulated work) - **ILO**
- III) The argument, that development policy and planning need to include children's needs - **UNICEF**

Impact of idea I

► Terms of trade

Ahead of the curve idea I: Terms of Trade – and policy recommendations

- ▶ Developing countries are permanently condemned to inferior economic status because of the long-term trends in the prices of commodities – their main export - compared to the prices of manufactured exports: **“economic imperialism, exploitation”** (Singer 1949)
- ▶ Need for commodity funds (building on Keynes' advocacy at the Bretton Woods talks)
 - ▶ Stabilise the prices and output of commodities
 - ▶ Create surplus, in developing countries, for investment
 - ▶ Lead diversification
- ▶ Regulate transnational companies

Continuity of Singer's analysis and policy ideas at UNCTAD

UNCTAD Trade and Development Report: review of policy– 2015-2023

- ▶ “market access conditions still **biased against developing countries**, ... and to exports from developing countries in particular
- ▶ “in legal terms, WTO rules are equally binding on all participants, but in economic terms they are **biased towards** an accommodation of the requirements of the **developed countries**”
- ▶ “... **commodity price volatility** is one of the reasons why commodity-dependent economies have lower long-term average growth rates than economies with diversified production”
- ▶ “the global economic system would gain greater coherence if new efforts were made at the multilateral level to **control price fluctuations** on international commodity markets “
- ▶ “Some important work on the **fallacy of composition** and **deteriorating terms of trade** even for manufactured goods exporters showed how even so-called “sunrise” industries ... can easily get overcrowded in global markets, leading to declining relative prices and reduced unit values of such exports “

UNCTAD's empirical research

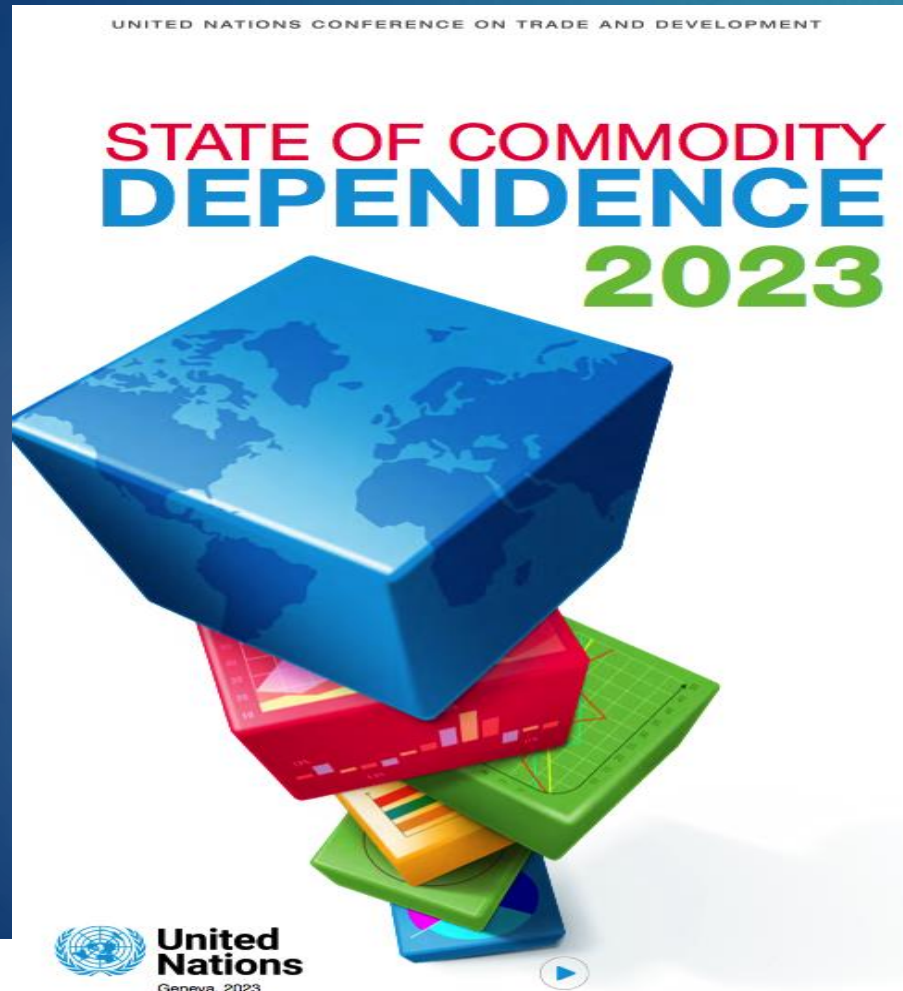
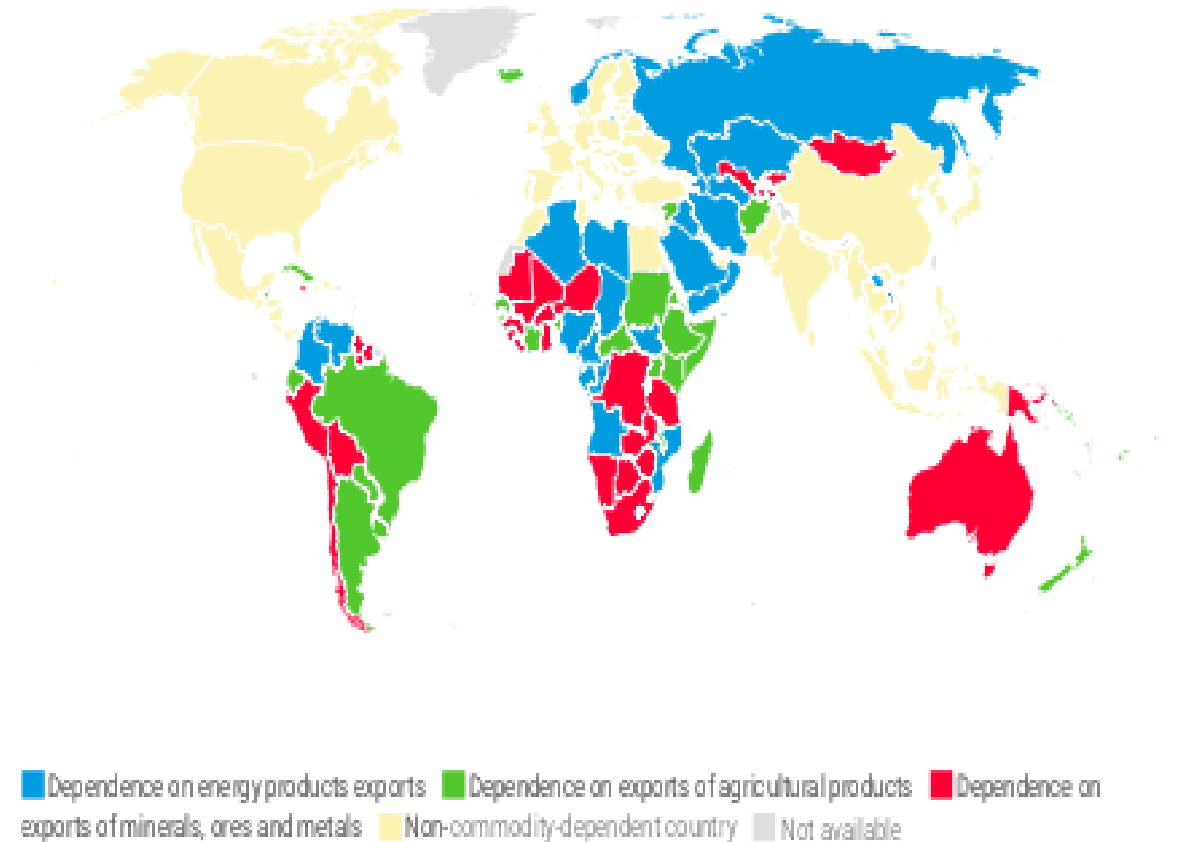


Figure 2

Commodity dependence by dominant export product group, 2019–2021



UNCTAD's work: Common fund for commodities

Organization



*As of 31 March 2024 based on most recent reports

Impact of idea II

- ▶ **The informal sector**
 - ▶ **2 billion people are in unregulated work (no contract, no social security)**

Ahead of the curve idea II: „informal sector“

- ▶ **Origin of the concept**
- ▶ **ILO commissioned Kenya study 1972:
“Employment, incomes and equality”**
- ▶ **Heterodox assessment of the sector as
efficient, innovative, resilient, profitable
(relates to Schumpeterian theory)**
- ▶ **Role of women**
- ▶ **Built on work of Institute of Development
Studies, University of Nairobi**

“The problem with employment is that the statistics are incomplete, ... omitting a range of wage earners and self-employed persons, male as well as female, in what we term ‘the informal sector’.

“The popular view of informal sector activities is that they are primarily those of petty traders, street hawkers, shoeshine boys and other groups ‘under-employed’ on the streets of the big towns. The evidence presented in Chapter 13 of the report suggest that the bulk of employment in the informal sector, far from being only marginally productive, is economically efficient and profit-making, though small in scale and limited by simple technologies, little capital and lack of links with the other (‘formal’) [sic] sector. Within the latter part of the informal sector are employed a variety of carpenters, masons, tailors and other tradesmen, as well as cooks and taxi-drivers, offering virtually the full range of basic skills needed to provide goods and services for a large though often poor section of the population.

Reception at that time?

“We were very close to the Kenyan Philip Ndgewa who was we think permanent secretary of planning or had another senior position and we negotiated and talked with him and he was fully in support.

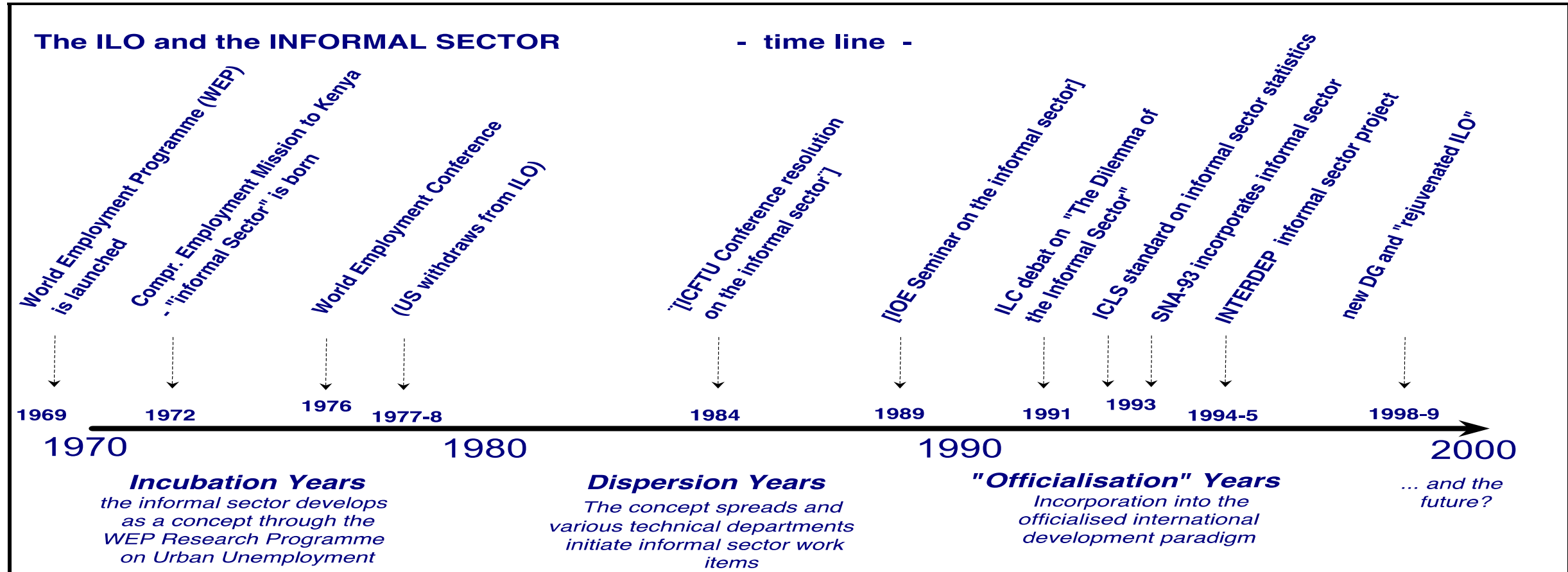
... the reaction within the ILO was doubtful and uncertain by the old guard but **supported by our friends and the more go-ahead people.”**

Particular regard for the role of women in economic activities “wasn't based on Hans' 1930s studies but **came out in our conversations in the late 60s and early 70s.”**

Richard Jolly (2025) (Email correspondence)

Idea II: impact

Figure 1



ILO – empirical research and advisory work

Français | Español



International
Labour
Organization

ILOSTAT

The leading source of labour statistics

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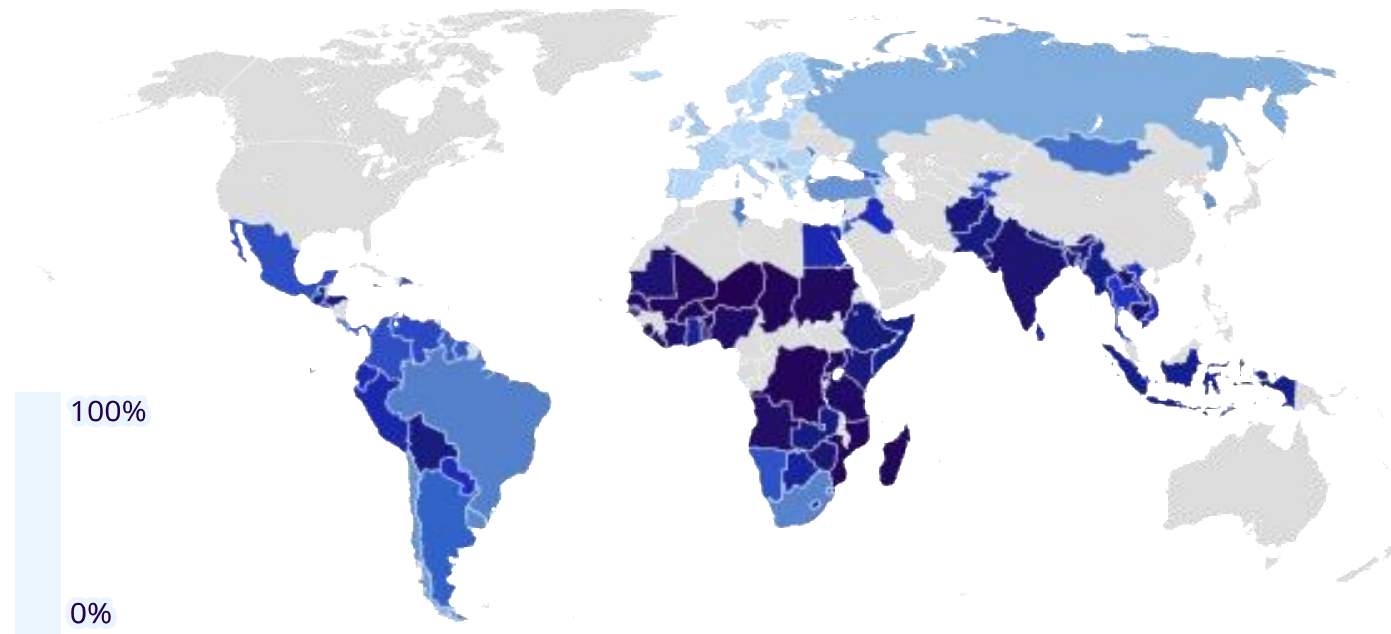


Topic

Statistics on the informal economy

► High rates of informality in developing countries

Informal employment rate, latest year



Boundaries shown do not imply endorsement or acceptance by the ILO. See full disclaimer: ilo.org/disclaimer.

Source: [ILOSTAT](#) • [Get the data](#)

ILO advocacy



International
Labour
Organization



[International Labour Conference](#)



104th Session of the International Labour
Conference (2015)

1991:

International Labour Conference:

International tripartite debate on the
informal sector

2015:

ILO Recommendation 204:

Transition from the Informal to the
Formal Economy

Impact of idea III

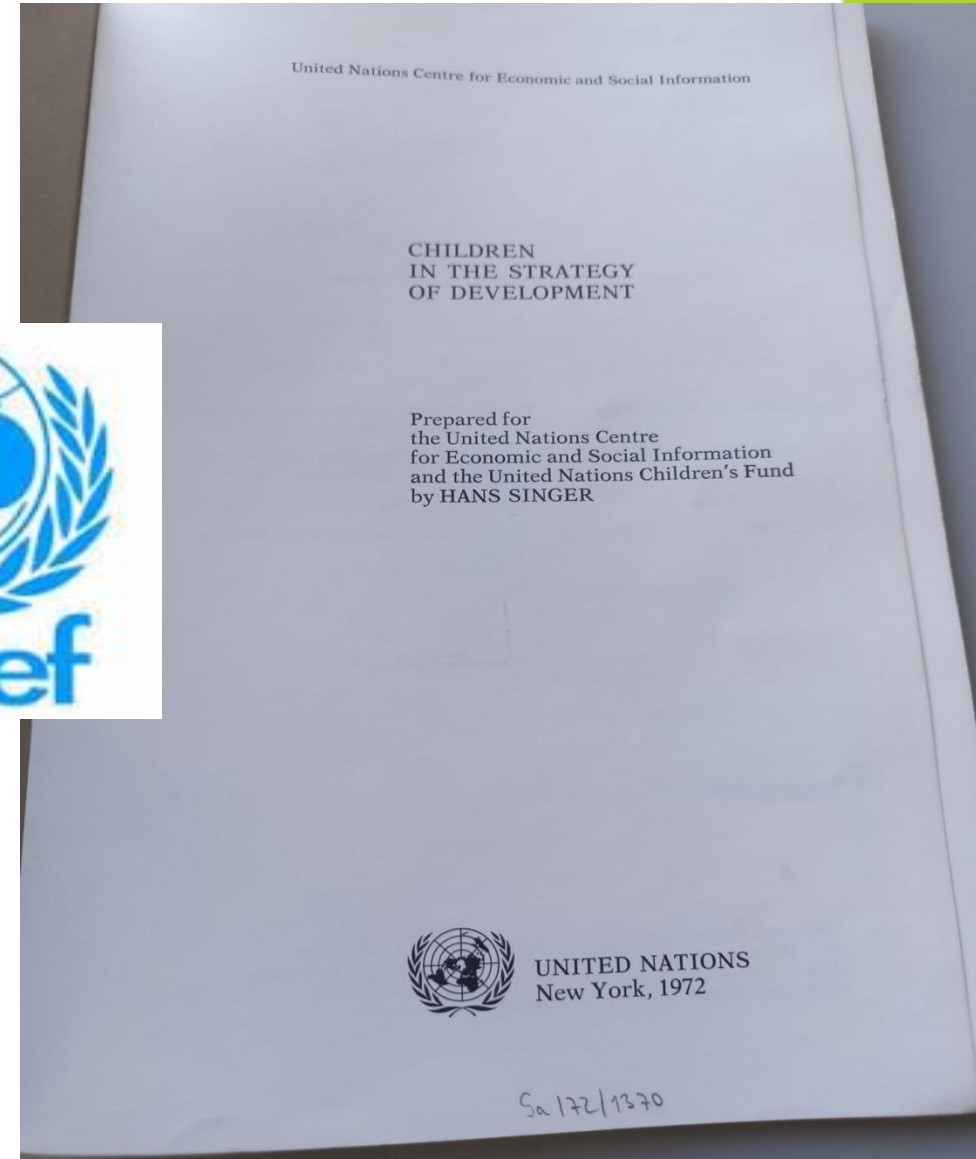
- Recognise the needs of children in development cooperation

Children in
development.
Study for Unicef
(1947)

Children in the Strategy
of Development.
Study for Unicef (1972)

Effects of recession on
children

Bellagio conference
(1984)



Ahead of the curve idea III: the 1972 study

References/rationale

Declaration on child rights

2nd UN development decade

Rio earth climate

5/6 of all children live in poor countries: (almost) no chance to develop their potential

Insufficient child nutrition

Lack of education and skills traps

High population growth

Principles

Real reason for development:
Better future

Economic growth is not an end of itself

Needs of children relevante

Approach (ref: Keynes)

Purpose of economic planning: decrease social and economic injustice In Menschen (human resources) investieren!

Different age groups – different needs

Build needs analysis onto development plans

**Children in
development.
Study for Unicef
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**Children in the Strategy
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Study for Unicef (1972)**

**Effects of recession on
children, Bellagio
conference (1984)**



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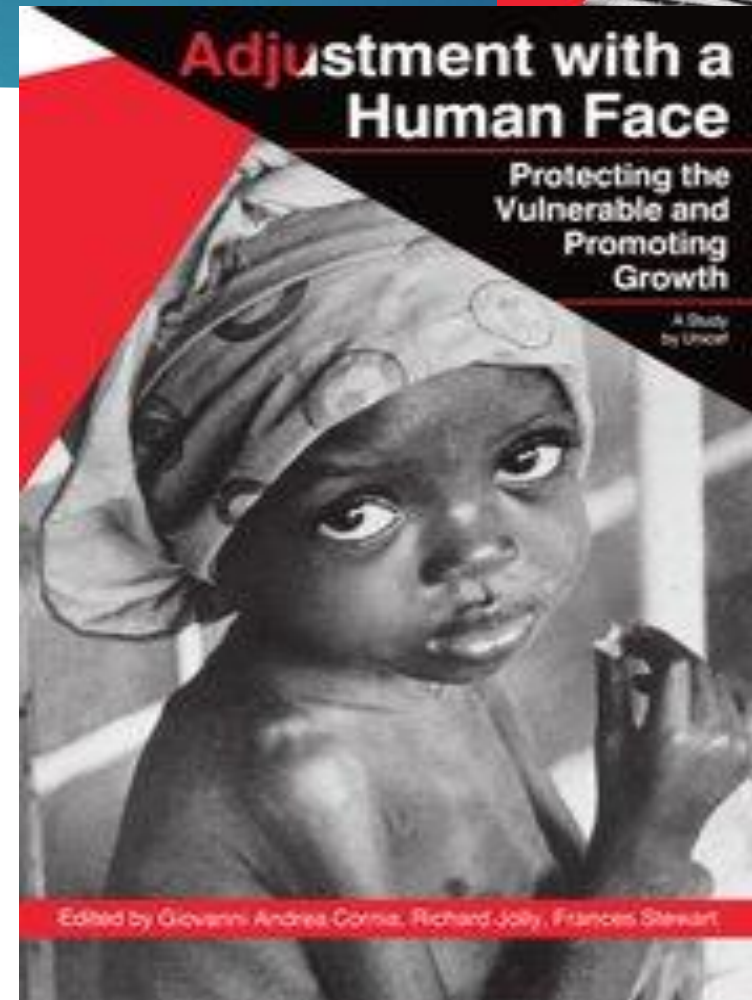
Political and research advocacy, influenced by Hans Singer's analyses

Open criticism of the World Bank/IMF's Structural Adjustment programmes:

- ▶ Jolly and Cornia 1985.
The Impact of the world recession on
children. World Development
- ▶ Cornia, Stewart and Jolly 1987.
Adjustment with A Human Face

Questioning of conventional economic theory:

- ▶ UNDP Human Development Reports
(since 1990)



Adjustment with a Human Face

Ten
Country
Case
Studies

A Study
by Unicef

a Cornia, Richard Jolly, Frances Stewart

Edited by Giovanni Andrea Cornia, Richard Jolly, Frances Stewart

Empirical research



Blog: Eine Krise im Verborgenen: Kinderarmut in Deutschland

Feb 2025

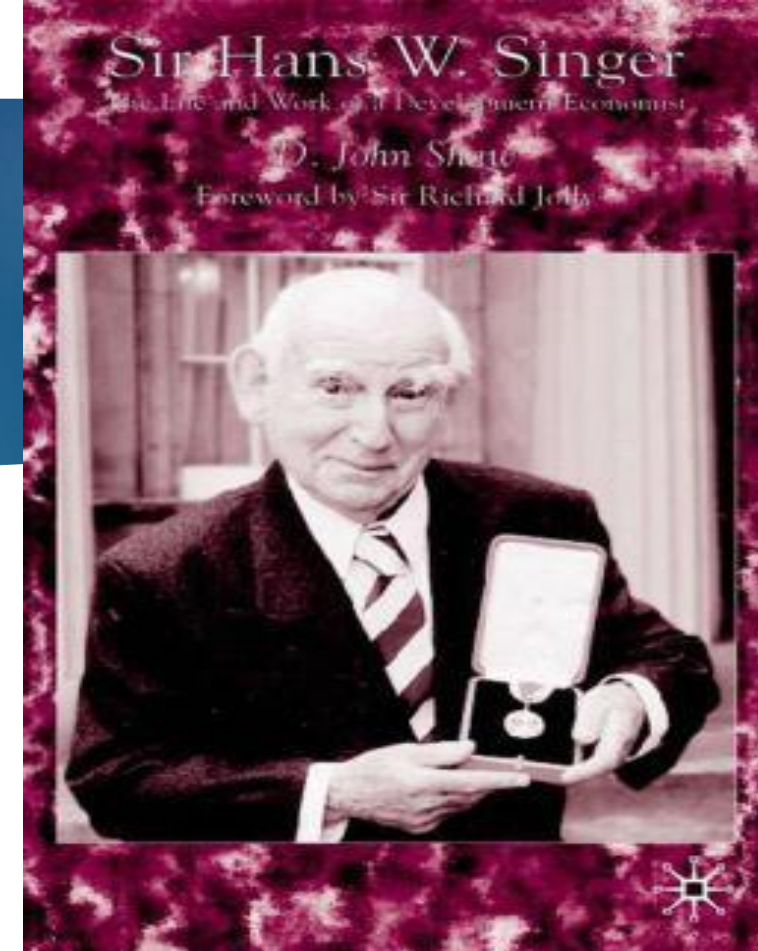
- **MICS, established in 1995, is a household survey programme that generates data on the status and well-being of children, adolescents and their families, and helps shape policies for the improvement of their lives.**



Conclusion: Ideas – their role in the UN – and in the world ...

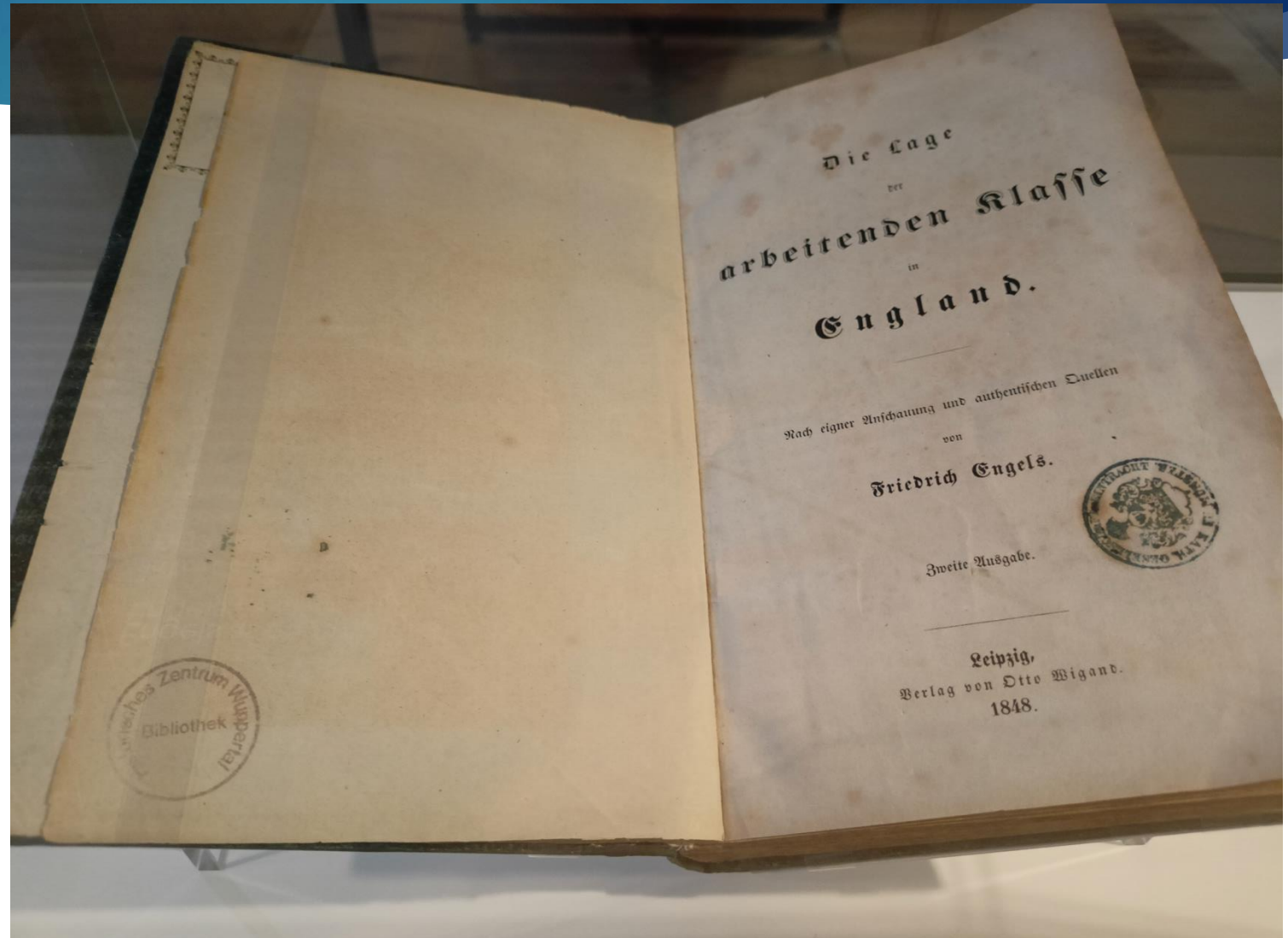
Hans Singer's legacy:

- ▶ His leitmotif: (globale) justice
- ▶ A heterodox economist – challenged conventional wisdoms
- ▶ An „activist“
- ▶ Ideas that (try) to change the world ...



... Ideas – their role in the world -

Friedrich
Engels,
another
thinker from
Wuppertal



Ideas – their role in the UN and in the world

„Today, in times of global ecological crises, Singer's questions regarding the international integration of economic, social and ecological concerns are of greater relevance than ever before --- and the perspectives for just global cooperation“.

Symposium programme

<https://wupperinst.org/a/wi/a/s/ad/8838>

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