



World Chronicle

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THE UN'S UPCOMING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC AGENDA

When the United Nations came into being in 1945 some observers thought that the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) would match – in the areas of health, development and human rights – the central role played by the Security Council in global peace and security. Why has ECOSOC not lived up to this expectation? What is the focus of this year's economic and social agenda? How does ECOSOC affect policy on a practical level? These are some of the questions addressed in this issue of **World Chronicle** by the President of ECOSOC, Ambassador Marjatta Rasi of Finland.

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ANNOUNCER: From the United Nations in New York, an unedited interview programme on global issues. This is **World Chronicle**. And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

JENKINS: Hello, I'm Tony Jenkins and this is **World Chronicle**.

When the United Nations came into being in 1945, the international community gave birth to twins -- two councils: one to deal with peace and security and the other to deal with issues of development, health and human rights. In more than five decades since, the Economic and Social Council – generally known as ECOSOC -- has often remained in the shadows while the Security Council has basked in the spotlight of world attention. This, despite the fact that most of the UN's work, and that of its agencies, deals precisely with issues of health, development and human rights, and that most experts agree that peace and security issues cannot be looked at in isolation. Will ECOSOC regain its righteous place in the family of UN bodies?

Our guest today is Ambassador Marjatta Rasi of Finland, the President of ECOSOC. Ambassador Rasi, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

JENKINS: Why is it that ECOSOC has been so overshadowed by the Security Council for the last 50 years? I dare say everybody in our audience knows what the Security [Council] is and I dare say that very few have ever heard of ECOSOC, why is that?

AMB. RASI: Well, I think that I can't even answer to that question but what I can say, you know, if we read the United Nations Charter carefully we know what an important role ECOSOC should be playing and then we can ask the member states, the members of the ECOSOC and the members of the United Nations, "Why is it that it's not quite as it should be?" But what I can say is that we are very much on track now. ECOSOC has been much more active than what it was, let's say, a couple of years ago.

JENKINS: So if I hear you right, there's a good reason for peoples and governments to pay attention to what happens in the ECOSOC this year? Why should they? Will their destiny be shaped in some way by what goes on there?

AMB. RASI: Actually, you know, it was that conference in Monterrey – the Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development that sort of gave new, specific tasks to the ECOSOC. ECOSOC is one of those UN bodies that is supposed to coordinate the implementation of the Monterrey Consensus and that has given us a new impetus and new momentum and we have been doing that now since the Monterrey Conference. And I think that's very much on our agenda this year and, of course, it will continue to be, as well as the Millennium Development Goals that came from this Millennium Summit to Millennium Declarations.

JENKINS: Joining us in the studio are James Wurst of *UN Wire* and Louis Hamann of *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/CBC*. Louis...

HAMANN: Picking up on Tony's first question, Ambassador Rasi, I think I read somewhere, you were quoted saying that you want to bring – as president of ECOSOC you'd like to bring ECOSOC back in the loop. How do you plan to do that and in an ideal world would you like to see ECOSOC have the sort of visibility, or panache if you will, of the Security Council and the General Assembly?

AMB. RASI: Yes, of course I would very much like to see that but of course one ambassador is the president of the ECOSOC for only one year and you can't possibly achieve very much during one year.

HAMANN: Probably there's something that could or should be changed in your opinion, maybe to have maybe more continuity as to what the president wants to do?

AMB. RASI: We have continuity to the extent that it has been the practice now that the vice president of ECOSOC, the senior vice president of ECOSOC then becomes the president of ECOSOC. I was the senior vice president last year, now I'm president. But of course in the UN that rotates according to the geographical groups so it goes from one group to another.

HAMANN: Is it maybe time to rethink because we're sitting here talking as to how we need or, you know, ECOSOC should have more importance in the UN world if you will? Is it time maybe for you guys to start thinking about how to change this continuity problem that you've talked about? In other words, should we start thinking about having a president for two-year or three-year terms?

AMB. RASI: But as I said, the ECOSOC case is probably the only UN body that has that continuity in the meaning that the senior vice president becomes the president. The General Assembly president is elected for one year and the Security Council president only on a monthly basis, so it is different. So I don't think that's the main issue with what we are talking about here now. The main issue is that probably the member states have not been able to use ECOSOC as they should and, as I said, Monterrey gave us very much a new role and a new momentum.

WURST: We're two years on now from Monterrey. I mean that was for Financing for Development; the idea that developing countries would improve their governance, their ability to absorb and commit their own resources to development and the donor countries would be increasing their what's called ODA, Official Development Assistance. Now, as I say, we're two years on, are we any better than we were two years ago since this is one of the key elements, key issues on your agenda?

AMB. RASI: I think we are. Of course the progress in these extremely huge issues can't be but reasonably slow but I think you know what comes to both sides if we want to simplify. You know, the Official Development Assistance has increased and some countries have really pledged to increase it, like the countries of the European Union – 25 now. And, also, on the other side the developing world. You know, they have emphasized much more issues like good governance, democracy, respect of human rights and all those things. There are many achievements since Monterrey but, of course, we still have to continue to work.

WURST: But just recently the Commission on Sustainable Development, which is again under your authority so to speak, completed a session and they're saying, "Well, we're on track to get to the Millennium Development Goals, we're doing better on aid but we're still looking at a billion more slum dwellers in the next several decades, still a billion people without adequate water and sanitation". These are enormous numbers. And, again, as you say, it is pledges to increase and pledges to increase good governance. What do you have at your disposal to relieve this billion people situation?

AMB. RASI: It is very serious and when we discuss about the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, you know, it's true that in some spheres the progress is much better than in some others. Like we may be able to have quite a major progress in alleviation of poverty generally speaking, but it's correct that we have major problems in water and sanitation and human settlement, the housing. It's really a very big issue.

JENKINS: But surely larger than the problems with the bureaucracies is the problems of getting the funding in the first place and to get the attention of the world's capitals? And the UN has been good at organizing these conferences and setting goals but the follow up from governments I don't think has always been there. Would you agree with that?

AMB. RASI: Yes. That's very much the issue, you know, that here in the UN headquarters and in some of those major world conferences held in the 1990's – and later we had Monterrey, we had Johannesburg -- and if we carefully study the outcome of those world conferences we know that we have done a lot in the--

JENKINS: It looks good on paper, yes.

AMB. RASI: It looks very good. Now it's time, as I said, to roll up our sleeves and really start to do the implementation part of that.

JENKINS: I understand. So you want to crack the whip. Now here's the question I have. I'm wondering if the problem with those who want to push the development agenda is that they're not phrasing it right, they're not putting it into the right context, because it seems to me there's a growing body of opinion now that believes that at least part of the roots of terrorism that we're all grappling with now have to do with development issues. In other words,

if you are poor and you're homeless and you are hungry then you have no reason to choose to live by the sort of civilized standards that we would like to see everybody living by around the world. You have more reason, more impetus, to want to pick up a gun and fix things in a violent way. Actually, I've been thinking about the latest numbers I seen recently as to the cost of the war in Iraq. Experts say now that by the time the coalition forces pull out we could have spent something like 300 billion dollars in Iraq. I'm wondering if you think that money might have been spent more effectively in tackling the war on terrorism if it had been spent on development issues, if it had been used to alleviate some of the poverty and unemployment in the Arab world for example?

AMB. RASI: But of course. I mean I think almost everybody agrees on that but the only thing is now that it's not up to the United Nations to decide on that.

JENKINS: But do we hear a loud enough message coming out of your Council saying, "Listen guys, these issues affect each and everyone of you. If you don't do something about these issues it's going to come back to bite you on the backside?" Are you telling people this?

AMB. RASI: Yes, we discussed about that of course but then when we take the systems here – you all know how the decision-making happens in the UN context. So, it's not just that I can tell or somebody else can tell that this money should be used elsewhere; I mean of course, it should. That's my personal opinion. But, as I said, we can be happy that the Official Development Assistance money has increased and also what is very important to many developing countries is what they receive from their expatriates living outside their countries. But we also know now when we discuss about financing for development it's not only ODA money; we need private investments, we need major investments but, also, locally, not only investments abroad but also locally. We know that in some countries the money goes outside and the money doesn't stay within that country and help and assist that country.

JENKINS: You mean the money is stolen?

AMB. RASI: No, I don't even mean stolen but they invest somewhere else and things like that.

HAMANN: You talk about focusing on different sources of investment, different sources where you can get your money and one of the ideas that's being discussed recently is this global tax on maybe transactions, commercial transactions, financial transactions. Can you tell us where that discussion is at? Is that going forward and is that being taken seriously as a new source of funding for development?

AMB. RASI: I think that we also have to pay very much attention to all kinds of innovative financing sources when we discuss about how to help increase the development

assistance, not only official, but find different sources. But at the same time we also realize that it's not that easy, you know, to find those binding new resources like this Toobin tax or some other like some lottery money going to the Third World countries. It's not so easy because we have to agree again together.

HAMANN: But do you think the idea of a global tax could ever come to be? I mean is that something that is way out there or is it something that we could eventually see maybe in the next 5-10 years? Can you see agreement? Can you see consensus coming around that issue?

AMB. RASI: At the moment, you know, I don't see a consensus around that question but as I said, times may change and...

JENKINS: But how seriously is it being debated? I mean we had the French Development Minister here last week and he was arguing in favour of exactly this idea.

AMB. RASI: Well, it is discussed, you know, in the different UN fora but we know that there are a few countries that are really speaking loudly in favour of them and we know that some other member states have concerns or reservations on this.

JENKINS: Which ones?

AMB. RASI: Well, I don't have to mention them, you may know them, but I mean it's not that simple. In Finland we have tried to invent some kind of global lottery but the income could then be used for some funds for the Third World countries but it has been very slow to come to a real life.

JENKINS: Let me just say, this is **World Chronicle**, and we are talking about the economic and social agenda of the United Nations with Ambassador Marjatta Rasi of Finland, the President of ECOSOC. Jim...

WURST: Again, on the question of financing rather than taxes, one of the things that some countries talk about enthusiastically in other countries and NGOs, Non-Governmental Organizations, complain about is greater privatization; what in UN terminology is often called "public-private partnerships" which some critics just simply state that this is a cover for privatization. The idea that basic services, or even aid development, comes under the authority of private business, which of course has a profit motive that doesn't exist for governments or for the United Nations -- there is obviously a trend towards more private business money involved in this but are the charges that strings are attached being levelled accurate or do you think that's a little too off the mark?

AMB. RASI: No, it's really something that becomes more and more today's life, you know. We have, in the context of ECOSOC -- and if I'm thinking about last Monday's meeting, we had this high level meeting with ECOSOC, the Bretton Woods institutions, WTO, UNCTAD

and then the private sector and NGOs; and that's again one of those very positive issues that came from Monterrey that we acknowledged then that we need all these partners, all these stakeholders to work together so that we all understand that the private sector, business, has a very important role, as does the whole spectrum of international organizations and, very importantly, civil society, NGOs.

WURST: But is there danger of in effect the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions in a sense selling off developing countries to private capital?

AMB. RASI: No, I don't think that we can do that. We can't sell any ideas or anything. It's very much up to those member states, those countries if they are willing to receive these private companies or private sector or NGOs to work together with their authorities in their respective countries. We can't force them. We can't say no.

JENKINS: When you talk about the Bretton Woods institutions you're talking about the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund. As I understand it one of the areas where you think you're making progress is in relationships that you've developed with those institutions and with the World Trade Organization. What is it that you've succeeded in doing? What sort of fruit do you expect to see coming from these meetings?

AMB. RASI: You know, what we have emphasized in this kind of cooperation we have with those institutions is to see how we can better coordinate our work and that we have coherence in what we do. That, of course, is the most important. The role of the ECOSOC can be very much like helping to put these partners, stakeholders, together to sit down and discuss, you know, what is your role, what we can do, what you should do and that we all do the same things.

JENKINS: Is it a necessary job? In other words, does the whole area in which you're involved of development and human rights, does it need ECOSOC to be playing this sort of coordinating role or rather is there a danger that it just creates one more layer of bureaucracy and these organizations which work out in the field are better left to just get on with it?

AMB. RASI: I do believe that is very important that we have this good cooperation not only with the Bretton Woods institutions but with other international players. And through our discussions, the discussions of the current ECOSOC bureau, and during my own ECOSOC presidency, we have a very good dialogue with the Washington-based institutions.

JENKINS: And it's produced what though exactly?

AMB. RASI: It's more visible on the ground, you know, but when they are in country A, or country B, that they really feel that they are part of this whole, should I say, international family operating in that country.

HAMANN: I'd like to pick up on a point you made earlier in the show and that is this notion of shared responsibility. Yes, the rich countries have a responsibility to give money for development but poor countries receiving that aid also have responsibilities. And one of the things that came out of Monterrey is this new notion of conditions, setting conditions. Yes, poor country, we will give you that billion dollars but you have to show us that you've got a responsible government, rule of law, et cetera, et cetera. Isn't there a risk somewhere where very poor and very badly managed countries are just going to stay there or even fall further behind because they're never going to see the aid for which they have to show conditions that they'll never be able to meet? I don't know whether you follow my reasoning here.

AMB. RASI: But we have already in the UN context accepted the idea that a certain percentage of our official ODA should go to least developed countries so that's again up to the donor community to pay very much attention to least developed countries. But you are right in what comes to the private investments because of course you can attract private capital and private investments only if your political situation is stable. I mean if you are in a pre-conflict or just an after conflict situation it's much more difficult to attract investments.

HAMANN: What I'm talking about is, public investments from governments. For example, one of the things that came out of the NEPAD, the New Partnership for Development in Africa, was that governments were going to start paying much more attention – rich governments – on what kind of good governance sort of issues were appearing in poor countries in order to give that money. We're not talking about private investment here. So isn't there a risk that more and more – and I think the United States, Canada, my own country, is looking more and more at good governance as a condition for giving public money to these countries, so isn't there a problem, or isn't there a risk somewhere that we may leave some poor countries behind or even further behind?

AMB. RASI: You know, there may be the risk because I'm thinking of my own country, Finland, where we try to address our bilateral development assistance money to least developed countries, but of course, at the same time the government is responsible to taxpayers because it is after all the taxpayer's money we are using and they have to feel safe and secure that the money, is really well-used and used really to assist that country and assist the people of that country.

JENKINS: I wonder if, perhaps for the benefit of our viewers, you could explain how ECOSOC affects policy on a practical level? Maybe you might want to talk about the example of Guinea Bissau, which I know is one area where you focused, should I say, like a laser recently and you started to put into practice, I believe, some of the things that you're trying to establish.

AMB. RASI: Guinea Bissau and Burundi, we have two ad hoc advisory groups established by the ECOSOC, that is the Advisory Groups on African Countries Emerging out of Conflicts. And we have now these two, Guinea-Bissau and Burundi, and they've really been a very good link between the Security Council and between the Economic and Social Council and also the link between the political stability, political issues and development issues. And there, in both cases, we have worked very closely with the international actors -- you know, the Bretton Woods institutions, the whole UN family. And those two cases are really -- I think that they can be very, very happy with the...

JENKINS: But what was it in practice on the ground? How would the government of--

AMB. RASI: It isn't the practice, you know. They're all those stakeholders on the ground, they get together, they discuss, you know, okay, we are doing this, and then you should be doing that and how can we do this together. I mean it's really concrete dialogue they have on an everyday basis.

JENKINS: And that was done because ECOSOC told them to do it?

AMB. RASI: Actually, ECOSOC didn't tell them but you know these advisory groups they're visiting those countries and they've discussed not only with the authorities of those countries but they discussed with the UN family on the ground, they discussed with the Bretton Woods institutions on the ground, private sector and civil society, and really sort of try to then sort of establish the kind of ruling that the government authorities have their part -- I mean their role is really the safety and security and political stability. And then comes ECOSOC and the economic and social sides and other financial institutions and they try to then assist the country in question on their development issues. So that it was like a -- and that all went I would say reasonably good, or very good.

WURST: I'd like to circle this back to reform of the Council itself. Now when people talk about the reform of the Security Council there's a general understanding that it means expanding the Council, permanent members, non-permanent members, better geographic balance, better representation. What does reform mean in terms of ECOSOC? Narrowing your agenda, expanding your membership, contracting the membership? You've got 54 countries on the Council now, what does reform means in terms of ECOSOC?

AMB. RASI: You know, ECOSOC of course, it has this should I say strange number, or it's not strange, but this kind of a number of members that some member states think that it's too big because it's 54 and therefore the decision making is difficult. And some others think that it's too small because we are dealing with global issues where every single member state of course wants to be part. That's probably one reason that these issues have been slowly moving towards the General Assembly. We are very much discussing about the reform or

revitalization of ECOSOC, which I think is very much on its way already during this particular year. But this is something that the ECOSOC members and the bureau members and myself we have been closely in touch with the members of the Secretary-General's Blue Ribbon panel because now I think that – and actually later this week we are going to have an informal panel to discuss ECOSOC reforms. But I think that the timing is such that we now have to wait for the outcome of the Secretary-General's panel and let them work in peace and then, you know, see what we can do together.

WURST: All right. I'm bringing that together with the questions...

JENKINS: Quickly, we have to end it there.

WURST: --the issue of Guinea Bissau. Is there any possibility of something along the lines of an office in ECOSOC that adopts each least developed country and say, "Okay, we're going to focus, laser-like focus on this country, on all 50". Is that something that's realistic?

AMB. RASI: You know, our theme for next summer's substantive session, the general theme is the least developed countries and implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action, so we will very much concentrate on least developed countries and rural development during our forthcoming substantive session.

JENKINS: Ambassador Marjatta Rasi, thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Ambassador Marjatta Rasi of Finland, the president of ECOSOC. She was introduced by James Wurst of *UN Wire* and Louis Hamann of the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporations/CBC*.

I'm Tony Jenkins. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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