

CAEI

Centro Argentino
de Estudios
Internacionales

A New Decade -- And Why Argentina Can Make a Difference

by David Smith

Working paper 17

Programa Organismos Internacionales

Todos los derechos reservados. - Pág. 1



A New Decade -- And Why Argentina Can Make A Difference

Por David SMITH

Director / Centro de Información de las Naciones Unidas para Argentina y Uruguay (CINU
Buenos Aires)

Introducción

“Se estima que para finales de 2010 unos 64 millones de personas se agregarán a quienes ya viven en la pobreza, y otros 41 millones, a los malnutridos”

Naciones Unidas, Informe 2010

The other day my boss, the United Nations Secretary-General, looked back on yet another tumultuous year across our planet. He concluded that the world was changing in the most dramatic ways since World War Two, and the birth of the UN.

“We live in a unique multilateral moment,” Ban Ki-moon told the assembled press corps in New York.

I would like to think he’s right, and not just because he’s my boss. I hope that next year we see the new multilateralism at work. I wish for an international community that moves proactively, rather than responding to the latest crisis. I pray for concerted action, not unilateral reaction.

Argentina can play a considerable role in helping the world find this path in 2011, at the start of a new decade, when Argentina will take the lead role in the organization that represents more than two-thirds of the world’s countries, big and small.

The year 2010, lest we forget, opened with a catastrophic earthquake in Haiti. Chile suffered likewise soon afterwards. Then came Pakistan, suffering monumental tragedy as flood waters engulfed millions, and tens of millions lost everything they had.

Beyond those headlines, as ever, stood the issues that so haunt our world. Poverty, hunger, inequality, health care especially for women and children, education especially for girls, access to clean water and affordable medication, climate change. My boss’s in-tray is overwhelming.



“Resources are tighter than ever, demands on the UN are growing” remarked the Secretary-General, reflecting on how the global recession has left the organization with the stark challenge of having to do more with less. “Truly global action requires mobilizing support, creating alliances, building coalitions...and progress does not come with big bangs, but with steady, determined steps.”

The year 2009 did end with a bang, for the United Nations, but not of the kind we wanted to see. A year ago a much-heralded summit on Climate Change in Copenhagen ended just before Christmas with a limited agreement of such last-minute patchwork that the only true consensus seemed to be that the UN forum, embracing all the countries of the planet, no longer represented THE arena in which to do business.

In the immediate aftermath of Copenhagen, the talk in major capitals was of the need to find another forum. In Washington DC, where I represented the UN this time last year, Barack Obama’s advisers made little secret to us of their belief that power had to shift to bodies such as the G20, the Group of 20 leading economies, Argentina among them, that had been formed in the wake of the financial crash of 2008.

‘The idea that you go to the UN for global buy-in, and hence global action, died in Copenhagen,’ I was told at the White House one day, a message that did not make my boss happy.

A year on, some evidence that the world senses that solutions do not necessarily flow from the major players talking amongst themselves, and then shaping a global agenda. This year’s G20 summits, in Canada and South Korea, proved notable for a lack of agreement on prime issues, significantly whether to spend or save your way out of the economic crisis.

And while no one at the UN would claim that the recent summit on Climate Change in Cancun delivered everything we wanted, there was at least progress this time – in particular the creation of a multi billion-dollar fund to help poorer countries cope with the consequences of our changing climate, and an agreement that commits all governments to a low-emissions future.

"The UN process has come off life support, " one of Europe's lead negotiators told us at the end of Cancun, "and there is an emerging realization among the big players -- The USA, China, India -- that small, medium-sized countries have to be at the table for a global crisis to receive a global response."

It is into this arena, with a world casting fishing lines for the forum in which to make common cause, that Argentina steps early in 2011.

On January 12, the Argentine Government will assume leadership of the group called G-77 plus China, in reality the organization that represents more than 130 nations. Given that the UN's membership stands at 192 countries, that's why Argentina will have the lead voice for over two-thirds of the world's states.

In my youth, the G-77 body was known as the Non-Aligned movement, and in my years as a journalist across our world, the movement was notable more for what it opposed, rather than what it proposed.

The Argentine Government has served clear notice that it wants to take a more positive approach. From President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner on down, the message has been that Argentina will lead the G-77 on issues such as Defence, Trade and Climate Change, acutely aware of its pivotal role with a seat at the high table of the G-20 as well as the G-77.

To quote Foreign Minister Hector Timerman : "Our place in the G-20 means that we are in position to act as an intermediary between the developed world and those countries still in development."

What surely helps is the growing recognition, outside this hemisphere, that Latin America may have lessons to teach others.

Take the global recession sparked by the Crash of 2008. The five years leading up to that represented Latin America's best since the 1960s, with growth averaging 5.5 per cent a year. In the two years since, a region that was once famous for economic instability has weathered the storm better than most. After a brief downturn in late 2008 and early 2009, a strong recovery is underway.

The recent Mercosur summit in Brazil celebrated economic growth of over 5 per cent for the region as a whole.

No wonder the man chosen by the Argentine Government to take the lead role in the G-77 process sees opportunity in 2011.

“The question is not whether my government has a rare window to make its voice heard, “ Argentina’s UN Ambassador, Jorge Arguello, told me over the phone the other day from his office in New York. “The issue is how we use that voice to act as a bridge between the most powerful, and the not-so powerful. It is a major challenge.”

Well said, Mr Ambassador. And good luck. Because the world is changing in dramatic ways, and it cries out for such voices seeking to unite, rather than divide.