

# Objects in Relations: Competing Visions of International Order at the Nexus of Human Rights and Development

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How is international order constructed and maintained, disrupted, and struggled about? In this article, I throw new light on these perennial questions of IR scholarship by turning attention to how expert knowledge and the objects it brings forth invite different ways of ordering. Theoretically, I develop a relational ontology of objects through a rereading of Foucauldian archeology and work in political ontology. My empirical story examines two objects of expertise that relate the more encompassing and elusive governance objects “human rights” and “development” in sharply contrasting ways. Born out of postcolonial legal discourse at the United Nations and the political project of “Third World” solidarity, the notion of a human right to development posits development as a human right and makes sense of its realization within an anti-colonial imaginary that politicizes international institutions and interstate relations. In contrast, the “human rights-based approach” that has lately been embraced as a normative methodology by United Nations development agencies evokes a hierarchical vision that privileges norms and knowledge that are seen as international, global, or universal, while seeking to improve and remold actors and practices in developing countries in their image. Despite their seemingly technical nature and international organizations’ well-documented tendency to downplay their value judgments, objects of expertise are thus entangled in and co-constitute different, potentially conflicting visions of international order.

Comment l’ordre international est-il construit et entretenu, perturbé et débattu ? Dans cet article, je jette une lumière nouvelle sur ces questions pérennes au sein de la recherche en RI en m’intéressant à comment l’expertise et les objets qu’elle tente de produire invitent différentes manières d’ordonner. Sur le plan théorique, je développe une ontologie relationnelle des objets par le biais d’une nouvelle lecture de l’archéologie foucauldienne et de son travail en ontologie politique. Mon histoire empirique analyse deux objets d’expertise en lien avec des objets de gouvernance plus inclusifs et évaisifs, les droits de l’Homme et le développement, de manières très différentes. Issue du discours juridique postcolonial des Nations unies et du projet politique de solidarité avec le tiers-monde, la notion d’un droit humain au développement envisage celui-ci comme un droit de l’Homme et explique son avènement au sein d’un imaginaire anticolonial qui politise les institutions internationales et les relations interétatiques. Par opposition, l’approche basée sur les droits de l’Homme récemment acceptée comme une méthodologie normative par les agences de développement des Nations unies évoque une vision hiérarchique qui privilégie les normes et la connaissance, considérées comme internationales, mondiales et universelles, tout en souhaitant améliorer et remodeler les acteurs et les pratiques des pays en développement à leur image. Malgré leur nature apparemment technique et la tendance bien documentée des organisations internationales de minimiser leurs jugements de valeur, les objets d’expertise sont ainsi enchevêtrés dans différentes visions potentiellement conflictuelles de l’ordre international et les co-constituent.

¿De qué manera se construye y mantiene el orden internacional? ¿De qué manera se interrumpe y lucha contra el orden internacional? En este artículo, arrojamos nueva luz sobre estas preguntas perennes de los académicos de las RRII dirigiendo la atención a la manera en la que el conocimiento experto y los objetos que este produce invitan a generar diferentes ordenamientos. De manera teórica, desarrollamos una ontología relacional de materias a través de una relectura de la arqueología foucaultiana y del trabajo en ontología política. La parte empírica examina dos materias de conocimiento que relacionan las materias de gobernanza más amplias y elusivas, «derechos humanos» y «desarrollo», de maneras marcadamente contrastantes. La noción de un derecho humano al desarrollo nació del discurso legal poscolonial en las Naciones Unidas y del proyecto político de solidaridad del «Tercer Mundo» y postula el desarrollo como un derecho humano otorgando sentido a su realización dentro de un imaginario anticolonial que politiza las instituciones internacionales y las relaciones interestatales. Por el contrario, el enfoque basado en los derechos humanos que últimamente ha sido adoptado como la metodología normativa por parte de los organismos de desarrollo de las Naciones Unidas evoca una visión jerárquica que privilegia las normas y los conocimientos que se consideran internacionales, mundiales o universales, al tiempo que trata de mejorar y remodelar a los agentes y las prácticas de los países en desarrollo a su imagen. A pesar de su naturaleza aparentemente técnica y de la tendencia bien documentada de las Organizaciones Internacionales a restar importancia a sus juicios de valor, las materias de conocimiento se enredan entre ellas y co-constituyen visiones diferentes y potencialmente conflictivas del orden internacional.

## Introduction

Questions of how social and political orders that transcend state borders are constructed and maintained, disrupted, and struggled about are at the core of International Relations (IR) as an academic discipline. From anarchy (Waltz 1979) to hierarchies (Zarakol 2017), race and colonialism (Vitalis 2017; Getachew 2019), from the imperialist expansion of capitalism (Rosenberg 2021) to the

historical-epistemic conditions of existence that underpin modern notions of sovereignty (Bartelson 1995), IR offers a wealth of contrasting accounts of “international order,” its history and constituent parts. In this article, I throw new light on this perennial topic by turning attention to the constitutive, political nature of expert knowledge and the objects that it brings forth. Drawing inspiration from genealogy, Foucauldian archeology, and political ontology,

I emphasize the value of exploring how objects that populate IR's world and their constitutive interrelations suggest and invite different ways of ordering. Thereby, I connect with recent IR theorizing that has frontloaded objects rather than subjects and human agency (Aradau 2010; Corry, 2013; Salter 2015, 2016; Allan 2018). A focus on objects and their interrelations, I aim to show, is a fruitful avenue for unearthing the constitutive, political nature of expert knowledge and its entanglements with different visions of international order. While perspectives that emphasize actors, their interactions, and agency are well-positioned to explain change in international norms and knowledge, an object-oriented engagement allows to explore the effects and world-making qualities of expertise.

To develop this argument and substantiate it empirically, I examine two objects that both sit at the nexus of human rights and development expertise at the United Nations (UN): (i) the anti-colonial international legal notion of a human right to development (henceforth, "right to development") and (ii) human rights-based approach to development (henceforth, "HRBA") that has lately been embraced as a normative methodology by UN development organizations. My comparative analysis of these two objects and the constitutive interrelations in which they are, respectively, embedded reveals something important about expert knowledge in international institutions: despite its seemingly technical nature and international organizations' (IOs) well-documented tendency to "downplay their deeply rooted value judgments as they apply their policies and programs" (Niezen and Sapignoli 2017, 11), objects of expertise relate more elusive and encompassing "governance objects" (Corry 2013), such as—in this case—development and human rights, in different ways. As a result, they become entangled in and co-constitute diverging, potentially conflicting visions of international order:

- As an object of expertise that emerged in UN human rights discourse during the Cold War period, the right to development makes sense of development and human rights within an anti-colonial imaginary of international order that politicizes international institutions and interstate relations. Development is understood to constitute a collective and individual human right, while infringements on postcolonial sovereignty and self-determination, as well as unequal political and economic relations between the former colonial powers and countries of the Global South are identified as salient threats to the realization of such a right.
- The HRBA encapsulates the historically novel notion that human rights must guide all practices by UN development programs, funds, and specialized agencies. In contrast to the right to development, HRBA locates obstacles to development and the realization of human rights *within* developing countries: in detrimental local practices and lacking "capacities" of agents whom UN organizations encounter. It therefore places human rights and development within a hierarchical vision that privileges norms and knowledge that are seen as global, international, or universal while seeking to improve and remold actors and practices in developing countries in their image.
- These two objects, thus, have markedly different ontological effects: They make the world in different ways, conjuring up some possibilities for how to enact international politics at the nexus of human rights and development while foreclosing others.

This innovative account of human rights expertise at the UN, its objectifications and constitutive effects, allows me to speak to three strands of literature. By highlighting the productive intertwinements between governance objects and the different ways of ordering that objects of expertise invite and preclude, this article contributes to object-oriented IR. It also offers new insights to recent research in IR and anthropology that explores how and why IOs depoliticize by frontloading the world-making and political *effects* of depoliticized IO expertise. Finally, the article advances human rights scholarship in and beyond the discipline by proying a novel archeological, relational, and object-oriented conceptualization of human rights and by showing how human rights expertise at the UN is imbricated with starkly contrasting political imaginaries.

In the next section, I situate my argument across these literatures and further specify the article's contributions to each of them. Thereafter, I develop a relational ontology of objects through a rereading of Foucault's archeological writings and theoretical work in political ontology, and I discuss how IO expertise can be thought and studied from a perspective that frontloads its world-making effects and political entanglements. The following sections dive into the empirical story. Tracing UN expertise on the interrelations of human rights and development across time and institutional venues, I show how it has brought worth, invited, and become part of starkly competing political visions of international order.

#### *Of Objects, Expert Knowledge, and Human Rights in IOs*

This article ties in with the recent turn to objects, discourse, and practice in IR theorizing on the politics of knowledge (Corry 2013; Sending 2015; Allan 2018). Traditionally, thinking on knowledge and expertise in IR focused on subjects (states, IOs, and experts) and their interactions. While this analytical focus can be traced back to E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau's writings (Allan 2018), the encompassing literature on epistemic communities is also a case in point: Scholarship in this theoretical tradition is driven by the ambition to trace the influence of experts, their networks, and their beliefs on other actors (policymakers) and their actions (policymaking or international "policy coordination") (Haas 1992; Cross 2013). More recently, research inspired by different strands of discourse and practices theory, as well as by new materialism and science and technology studies (STS), has sought to transcend this centering of the knowing, bounded human subject as an analytical *a priori*. This transformation has been variously characterized as a turn to discourse, practice (Bueger, 2014), and/or objects<sup>1</sup> (Allan, 2018). In this article, I build on this literature by focusing on the objectual aspects of human rights expertise rather than the experts who produce it or the policymakers potentially affected by it. I contribute to current theorizing by developing a relational ontology of objects that draws on Foucauldian archeology and political ontology. A focus on objects and their interrelations offers insights that lie beyond the analytical grasp of actor- and agency-focused perspectives: It provides a fruitful path for illuminating the world-making effects of expertise and for unearthing the

<sup>1</sup>I do not see these characterizations as mutually exclusive. Indeed, this article uses insights from archeology as a form of discourse theory and analysis that is concerned with "practices that systematically form the *objects* of which they speak" Foucault (1972). *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Pantheon Books. That said, object-oriented IR is a theoretically pluralist space that is populated by diverging theoretical perspectives that are not necessarily easily compatible.

subtle ways in which it partakes in (re)ordering the international realm.

How do object-oriented approaches to knowledge in IR grapple with the question of cross-border order/ing? A look at the emerging landscape of object-oriented scholarship shows that existing accounts diverge in their understandings of what *kind* of objects matter in international affairs. Conversely, they also offer different inroads to understanding how objects contribute to and/or disrupt social and political order. For some prominent proponents of the turn to objects, social actors orient toward, produce, and are shaped by encompassing “governance objects” such as human rights, the climate, the economy, or health (Madsen 2011; Corry 2013; Allan 2017, 2018). Objects, therefore, contribute to social order: They are part of the contingent social structure known to us as the international realm. For Olaf Corry, governance objects and the notion of a global polity even provide a novel flattened model for understanding international order writ large. At the place of anarchy and hierarchy, a focus on governance objects opens up for the notion of a global polity as an alternative theoretical model for understanding the globalized international system (Corry 2013). Similarly, Bentley Allan’s work emphasizes how knowledge “plays a key role in the construction of hybrid entities [...] that *structure* the landscape of international politics” (Allan 2018, 841, emphasis added). On the other side of the spectrum, new materialist and STS-inspired contributions to objectual IR take an interest in the fluidity, circulation, and boundary-spanning qualities of concrete material things. They emphasize that material objects do not only—or even primarily—order social relations but also disrupt, travel, and provide for circulation (Aradau 2010; Salter 2015, 2016; Leander 2019). Drawing on new materialist critiques of reductionist anthropocentric understandings of materiality, these interventions therefore sensitize for the many ways in which material objects are “not just the result of a complex assemblage of social practices and values” but exert agency and emphasize that materiality “has both enabling and constraining effects on what can be said and done” (Aradau 2010, 492).

In this article, I expand current thinking in object-oriented IR by exploring how objects of expertise become entangled in competing visions of international politics. My empirical story traces UN expert knowledge on human rights and development across decades and institutional venues, highlighting how authoritative expertise on these governance objects and their interrelations transformed over time. Together with the theoretical resources from Foucauldian archeology and political ontology that I mobilize, this empirical exploration lends itself to thinking through how objects that populate the world of international institutions *relate* and how they are shaped by—or better: emerge from—relations. Moreover, I seek to shed light upon how the hybrid and boundary-spanning objects of expertise that take center stage in this special issue unfold world-making effects and constitute international politics by relating governance objects, such as human rights and development, in different ways. The very process of objectification and technicization—of rendering something namable, recognizable, and authoritative as an object of expertise—is therefore political in an ontological sense of the term.

Beyond the theoretical context of object-oriented IR, this article also offers new empirical and conceptual insights that speak to recent research on IOs, authority, and depoliticization in IR and anthropology. In this field of research, there is a broad consensus that IOs shy away from politics and that they seek to disguise political conflict. As

Marieke Louis and Lucile Maertens put it, IOs “are at the forefront of the art of doing politics while pretending not to” (Louis and Maertens 2021, 2). To substantiate this claim, Louis and Maertens illustrate how IOs enact a rich repertoire of practices that minimize and conceal politics in order to bolster their own authority, preserve appearances of neutrality, escape accountability, and monopolize policy issues, among other “drivers” of depoliticization (Louis and Maertens 2021). In a similar vein, Annabelle Littoz-Monnet (2020) has recently written on the ambiguous politics of ethical expertise, and she has shown how it is employed by IOs as they seek to avoid being drawn into politicizing dynamics. Anthropological studies of transnational organizations confirm this picture by emphasizing how IOs translate political controversy into technical problems. They argue that IOs disguise deep-seated material and institutional inequalities by clothing their work in a managerial language of consensus, hence evoking a “gloss of harmony,” to cite Birgit Müller (2013), or a “fiction of the non-political,” to speak with Roland Niezen and Maria Sapignoli (2017, 11). Although it uses a different theoretical vocabulary, this literature echoes insights from classical historical-institutionalist assessments of IOs in IR as rational, technical, and rule-based bureaucracies (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). My empirical account of contemporary rights-based approaches to development aligns with this consensus on IOs depoliticizing proclivities. As a highly institutionalized and authoritative application of human rights to mundane practices of development programming, the HRBA lends support to claims about development organizations’ political “neutrality,” their unique “normative mandate,” and claims to expert authority.

However, the relational, object-oriented account of human rights expertise at the UN that I present in this article also expands on the existing literature. While extant contributions have significantly advanced our understanding of both *how* and *why* IOs depoliticize, my account draws attention to the world-making, political effects of depoliticized IO expertise. Rather than asking how and why IOs “deny or conceal contingency, choice and deliberation” (Louis and Maertens 2021, 2), or pondering how expert knowledge, claims to neutrality, and noble normative aims fortify IO power and authority per se (Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Sending 2015), I am interested in what seemingly technical IO expertise *does*. In other words, I am interested in how it coproduces the world of international politics. IO specialized knowledge, with its objectifications and materializations, I argue, is political in an ontological sense of the term: They make the world, regardless of whether they say so or not. Just like academic knowledge production on the international realm cannot escape ontological commitments (Wight 2006), neither can IO expertise.

Moreover, my analysis also adds empirical nuance to the IO and depoliticization literature by illustrating how the right to development is at once a decidedly technical international-legal construct *and* fiercely contested. As an individual and collective human right, it has been historically embraced by states, activists, and international lawyers of the Global South and the Non-Aligned Movement, but critiqued and marginalized by their counterparts in the Global North (Villaroman 2011; Whelan 2015; Arts and Tamo 2016; Cheru 2016). In the expert working group proceedings and international negotiations surrounding a possible legally binding international convention on the right to development that have been conducted under UN auspice since 2020 and are still ongoing, these lines of conflict are



resurfacing (Teshome 2022). As Barnett and Finnemore incisively note, international institutions “work hard to preserve [an] appearance of neutrality and service to others” (2004, 21). However, as salient political sites for the reproduction and renegotiation of global power relations, open political contestation is never far away. Moreover, politics in the narrower sense of contentious deliberations and overt conflicts between (groups of) actors is not confined to inter-governmental bodies, such as the General Assembly (GA) or the Human Rights Council (HRC), but travels “all the way down” to technical, legal, and operational applications of human rights expertise.

Last but not least, this article contributes to human rights research in and beyond IR. Broadly speaking, I align with political and discursive conceptualizations of human rights as a contingent political language rather than a narrowly circumscribed international legal construct (Douzinas 2003, 2013; Goodale 2007). My approach therefore departs from the standard conceptualization of human rights as universal international “norms” or “values” that marks both constructivist IR and related strands of international legal scholarship. The account of human rights expertise at the UN that I develop in the following pages does not share the analytical focus on actors, advocacy (networks), coalitions of experts, and civil society activism (Sikkink 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Reiners 2022), or the technical specificities of legal argumentation and institutional characteristics that have long characterized these literatures (de Búrca 2017; Davidson 2022; Lesch and Reiners 2023). Nor is it motivated by an underlying ambition to provide explanations for human rights compliance, (in)effectiveness, or norm change (see also, Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 2014; Bates 2015; Sikkink 2017).

My interest in the constitutive qualities of human rights expertise, its objectivations, and entanglements with visions of international order has more in common with socio-legal accounts that seek to grasp how human rights practices emerge from a “social universe” that is imbricated with power relations (Madsen 2011; Hoffmann 2022). Yet most directly, I contribute to the encompassing literature in international law, anthropology, and IR that has critically scrutinized human rights governing practices during recent decades (for illustrations, see Kennedy 2004; Orford 2011; Sokhi-Bulley 2011; Allen 2013; Hopgood 2013; Khor 2013). It advances this literature, as well as the much thinner emerging research strand on technical applications of human rights in international institutions (Koskenniemi 2010; Merry 2011, 2016; McGrogan 2016), empirically and conceptually by exploring the contingent politics of objects designed to govern the nexus of human rights and development cooperation and by emphasizing how they partake in, invite, and suggest different ways of ordering international politics.

Finally, the empirical story in this paper speaks to scholarship on human rights discourse and postcolonial world-making. By exploring the right to development and its establishment as a legal concept in UN human rights treaty bodies and expert groups, I illustrate that human rights expertise was an important site of struggle over the shape of international order in the second half of the twentieth century—thus extending on contributions that focus on self-determination and sovereignty (Grovoqui 1996; Anghie 2006; Getachew 2019) as central tropes in the project of decolonization. I therefore tie in with work that emphasizes the important role of postcolonial states, lawyers, and activists in shaping the contemporary human rights regime and the constitutive intertwinements between rights dis-

course and international order (Reus-Smit 2013; Berger 2022). Yet, rather than emphasizing the “contributions” of actors of the Global South and the Third World to our current status quo, my analysis of the right to development and the HRBA offers a less harmonious portrait of rights discourse as a site of *struggle* and discord over the shape of international order and the task of international institutions. To paraphrase Foucault, my account of human rights expertise at the UN emphasizes that this “world of speech and desire has known invasions, struggles, plundering, disguises, ploys” (Foucault 1977, 76).

#### *Thinking Objects and Expertise from the Vantage Point of Relational Political Ontology*

Politics is about competing visions of how the world is and how it should be. (Wight 2006, 2)

This section develops a relational ontology of objects and outlines how it informed my longitudinal analysis of UN expertise at the nexus of human rights and development from the early days of the Cold War to the current 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Thereby, I draw inspiration from Foucauldian archeology and theoretical work in political ontology. Whereas most Foucauldian contributions to the objectual turn in IR have frontloaded other theoretical notions, such as discourse or governmentality (Löwbrand and Stripple 2011; Corry 2013, 2024), Allan’s account of the turn to objects makes explicit the theoretical proximity to archeological analysis by noting that archeology throws into relief the “conditions of possibility for the emergence of objects” (Allan 2018, 853). However, few contributions to object-oriented IR, including Allan’s seminal study of climate governance (Allan 2017), mobilize archeology as their main source of theoretical inspiration.

For the study of objects that populate the international realm, I believe that a more thorough reading of Foucauldian archeology offers a productive inroad. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, discursive “formations” or “regularities” are described as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1972, 48–9). Archeology therefore aims to grasp discursive relations that are “immanent in practice” (Foucault 1972, 41). As a mode of inquiry, it traces the historically contingent and relational conditions that make it possible for something to emerge *as* an object, as something that can be talked about, that “exists in relation to other objects,” and that is thus rendered “manifest, nameable, and describable” (Foucault 1972, 44, 46). Put succinctly: Objects emerge from relations.

Archeology therefore embarks on a relational ontology that gives priority to processes, configurations, and ties rather than substance and predefined entities (Jackson and Nexon 1999). In this regard, the approach I develop here joins a broad trend in IR theorizing toward thinking the international *relationally* through attention to situated emergence rather than substance. This interest in relationality marks object-oriented scholarship but also encompasses recent work in quantum (Zanotti 2019), STS (Bueger 2019), and feminist (Zalewski 2019) IR, ontological IR theorizing in the wake of Heidegger and Foucault (Prozorov 2014a, 2014b), as well as recent nonsubstantialist work on agency that highlights how actors and the capacity to exert agency are relationally constituted, attributed to humans and nonentities, and struggled about in specific contexts (Hofferberth 2018; Braun, Schindler, and Wille 2019).

Despite its emphasis on constitution and contingency, archeology should not be mistaken for an idealist

theoretical endeavor (Hacking 2002; Oksala 2010). In fact, Foucault explicitly positioned archeology as a counter-project to the history of ideas, hermeneutic interpretation, and the analysis of language (“language,” Foucault 1972, 135–40). This is important to point out since IR has often been marked by a narrow, linguistic understanding of “discourse” as text and meaning that is “attached to,” interprets and represents material realities (for an excellent discussion, see Vaughan-Williams and Lundborg 2015). In contrast, if we follow Foucault, archaeology:

tries to define not the thoughts, representations, images, themes, preoccupations that are concealed or revealed in discourses; but those discourses themselves, those *discourses as practices* obeying certain rules. (Foucault 1972, 138, emphasis added)

Archeology, thus, is not concerned with text or language as separable from materiality and practice, but with the analysis of practices that constitute social relations. It brings into focus how social entities emerge from discursive practices “without reference to the ground, the foundation of things” (Foucault 1972, 48) and thus invites us to account for objects, their identity, and their effects through their interrelations and constitutive context.

For my purposes in this article, I therefore understand “objects” in an archeological sense as socio-material entities that are rendered “manifest, nameable, and describable” as a result of contingent practices and historical conditions of existence that are always “many and imposing” (Foucault 1972, 42, 44). In other words, objects are fragile units forged in discursive practices that may be differently understood and valued, but that it is nonetheless possible to speak about, to designate, and to be oriented toward in a given social and historical context. This broad archeological understanding encompasses what Olaf Corry has proposed to call “governance objects” (Corry 2013; see also Madsen 2011), as well as the notion of “objects of expertise” that the editor of this special issue has proposed as a sensitizing concept that allows the different article contributions to enter into conversation with each other (for a more elaborate theoretical discussion and conceptualization, please refer to Esguerra 2024). When I speak of “expertise” or “specialized knowledge” in the context of human rights, I understand the latter in a sociological and reflexive sense as knowledge that is assembled in professionalized practices concerned with human rights as an object of knowledge, *such as* human rights advocacy and research, standard-setting and treaty-making, monitoring, (strategic) litigation and adjudication in human rights law, human rights education, corporate practices of human rights due diligence, or human rights-based development cooperation (Madsen 2011; Eyal 2013).<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on these starting points, this article explores how “development” and “human rights” have been differently related and constituted in UN discourse since the second half of the twentieth century. Methodologically, my analysis is based on a comprehensive genealogical study of the postcolonial UN human rights archive during the Cold War and a subsequent tracing of materials on human, people-centered, and rights-based development that proliferated

<sup>2</sup>Accordingly, when I speak of (international) legal expertise, expert knowledge in international law, and so forth, what I have in mind are professionalized practices that oriented toward and seek to manipulate international (human rights) law, inter alia through progressive development of customary international law, through formal treaty-making, standard-setting, and codification, legal interpretation and commentary, litigation and adjudication, as well as the normative and substantive truth claims that are brought forth and sustained in such practices. Human rights expertise and international legal expertise therefore overlap in some practices and diverge in others.

across UN institutions in the post-Cold War period. Thereby, I drew on the notion of “surfaces of emergence” to trace how and where objects of expertise that forge relations between “development” and “human rights” first appeared and started circulating. Foucault describes this notion as “surfaces of appearance” or “fields of initial differentiation,” where “discourse finds a way of limiting its domain, of defining what it is talking about, of giving [something] the status of an object” (Foucault 1972, 41). For my purposes here, I therefore asked where—in which texts or speeches, practices, institutions, or struggles—objects first appeared and circulated historically, and I sought to grasp the fields of differentiation that made their appearance possible. Moreover, I lend inspiration from Foucault’s elaborations on the “formation of objects” to ask how the objects of expert knowledge that I examine relate “human rights” and “development” and how their interrelations are conditioned and made possible through their respective discursive-material contexts (Foucault 1972, 42–5).

This object-oriented, archeological mode of inquiry meant that my analysis did not separate a priori between hard and soft law, or between law, policy, and country-level “operational” implementation. Instead of taking these and other familiar distinctions, such as the one between the UN “human rights machinery”<sup>3</sup> and the UN “development system”<sup>4</sup>—and the different bodies, practices, and institutionalized differentiations that, respectively, structure these spaces—for granted, I traced expertise and its objectifications across these fields and institutional venues (on the notion of transversality as “cutting across” spaces and framings, see Bigo and Walker 2007; Hoffmann 2022). In the rest of this article, my empirical focus of attention will therefore wander across treaty bodies and expert groups that belong to the traditional UN “human rights machinery” and other venues of legal knowledge production and (customary) international law-making. But I will also consider programmatic declarations and speeches at major UN conferences after the end of the Cold War and influential policy reports issued in the context of UN reform efforts around the turn of the millennium, along with policy reports, technical guidance, educational materials, and best practice documentations produced by organizations in the UN “development system.” This article therefore considers and analyzes both legal and “non”-legal human rights expertise.

The next section enters upon the empirical story by tracing the emergence of the right to development in postcolonial international legal discourse following the broad wave of successful struggles for colonial independence in Asia and Africa during the first decades of the Cold War period.

#### *Human Rights Expertise and the Struggle for an Egalitarian Postcolonial Order*

The notion that development constitutes a human right emerged in the historical context of decolonization. Building on the legacy of anti-imperialist internationalism and struggles against colonial domination in Asia and Africa in the first half of the twentieth century, solidarity among colonized peoples and newly independent nations of the “Third World” was articulated as a global political project around

<sup>3</sup>The term “human rights machinery” commonly refers to the ten human rights treaty bodies and the Charter-based human rights monitoring mechanisms within the UN system.

<sup>4</sup>The UN “development system” encompasses thirty-seven programs, funds, specialized agencies and other entities. They are convened by the UNSDG as an interagency forum for policy coordination and overseen by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on the intergovernmental level.

the time of the African–Asian conference of Bandung in 1955 (Geertz 2005, 35–6; Prashad 2007, 3–50; 2012). The 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s saw a large wave of former colonial territories and peoples join the ranks of “civilized nations” as formally equal sovereign UN member states. As a result, UN institutions such as the GA, the Commission on Human Rights (CHR),<sup>5</sup> and the Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) became venues for the latter to engage in progressive legal interpretation and customary international law-making<sup>6</sup> as they sought to (re)shape the new international community and its rules of engagement (Rajagopal 2003, 7–37; Geertz 2005; Anghie 2006; Getachew 2019). As critical historians of human rights have illustrated, the process of decolonization and the evolution of international human rights law became deeply entangled as a result (Burke 2010; Jensen 2016).

The first postwar decades of postcolonial human rights and international legal discourse at the UN centered on questions of formal independence, self-determination, and racial discrimination (for pertinent examples of authoritative legal sources resulting from these developments, see GA 1960, 1962, 1965). In the 1960s, 1970s, and continuing into the 1980s, this postcolonial international legal discourse broadened as Third World international lawyers and diplomats became increasingly concerned with persisting institutionalized inequalities in international law and institutions, along with what they increasingly viewed as neo-colonial economic dependence and exploitation of Third World countries (Rajagopal 2003; Chimni 2006). As a result, novel international legal concepts, such as “full economic and political independence” and “full sovereignty over economic and natural resources,” were articulated as means to complete the promise of effective, as opposed to formal, postcolonial sovereignty (Anghie 2006, 748–9; Chimni 2006; Prashad 2007; Arts and Tamo 2016, 224–5). To cite a pertinent passage from the CHR, there was a sense “that man could not be politically free while at the same time being economically enslaved or culturally dominated” (CHR 1980, 116).

It was in this context of struggle over what would constitute an appropriate and just international order for the postcolonial international community among experts in international (human rights) law that the right to development

<sup>5</sup>Until the creation of the HRC in 2006, the CHR was the main UN legislative body charged with promoting and protecting human rights through the development and codification of new human rights norms, monitoring of compliance with existing human rights law, and the provision of technical assistance to states on human rights implementation. Like its successor HRC, the CHR was an inter-governmental body. Member states were elected on a yearly basis by the ECOSOC. Much like the HRC today, the work of the commission was supported by independent experts, such as expert working groups and special rapporteurs.

<sup>6</sup>Progressive legal interpretation and law-making through custom provided the decolonization project with legal force (for a detailed account, see Burke 2010). This can be exemplified by the International Court of Justice’s (ICJ) recognition of the right of all peoples to self-determination in the East Timor case, which had previously been proclaimed in the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (GA 1960) and the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations (GA 1970), and its recognition in the Western Sahara case of its *erga omnes* character and thus as part of customary international law. As such, GA resolutions are not legally binding, yet the ICJ’s ruling in the Nicaragua (Merits) case considered them to be evidence of *opinio juris* and thus of customary law in the sense of Art. 38(1) of the Statute of the International Court of Justice. GA resolutions can therefore “make law” through custom. CHR and HRC have served as venues for formal human rights treaty-making, yet they are also recognized in sociolegal accounts as pertinent sites of informal “everyday” law-making through legal interpretation and adjudication, see, for instance, Davidson (2022) and Lesch and Reiners (2023).

emerged as a discernable object. Secondary literature variously attributes the coining of the term to Senegalese foreign minister and later member of the International Law Commission Doudou Thiam and his 1966 address to the GA (Whelan 2015, 94) or to Senegalese international lawyer and judge Kéba M’baye (M’baye 1972; Barsh 1991; Arts and Tamo 2016). However, the establishment of the right to development as an object of expertise in international human rights law did not result from the spontaneous utterance of a “creative subject” (Foucault 1972, 139). It was historically premised on successive practices of knowledge production in the CHR, GA, and other UN venues, along with the creation of human rights expert bodies and the establishment of new legal instruments. This allowed the forging of new relations between objects and inscribed the right to development into the corpus of international (soft) law and human rights expertise.

In the work of the CHR, the right to development first appeared in the report on its forty-fifth session in the context of the realization of economic, social, and cultural rights and the “special problems which the developing countries face in their efforts to achieve these human rights” (CHR 1977, B1). This issue formed a recurring agenda point in the commission’s proceedings at the time (see for instance, CHR 1977, III; 1978, VI; 1980, IV; 1981, 118). CHR reports in the late 1970s and early 1980s connected the broader issue of postcolonial states “special” difficulties in the realization of economic, social, and cultural rights to persisting (neo)colonial economic exploitation, the right to self-determination, and the vision of reorganized, egalitarian international economic relations that countries of the non-aligned movement articulated in the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (GA 1974b; see also GA 1974c). For instance, the 1979 report refers to the:

effects of the existing unjust international economic order on the economies of the developing countries, and the obstacle that this represents for the implementation of human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly the right to enjoy adequate standards of living. (CHR 1977, III; 1978, VI; 1979, B2; 1980, 116, 154)

In 1981, a Group of Governmental Experts was established through the CHR and approved by the GA (CHR 1981, B15). Around the same time, the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights became the first authoritative instrument to recognize development as a human right (OAU 1982, Art. 2). In the following years, the Group of Governmental Experts submitted seven reports to the CHR (CHR 1982, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1989) and drafted the text for the Declaration on the Right to Development (GA 1986b). The latter was adopted by the GA in 1986 (GA 1986a) and remains the most authoritative international legal source proclaiming the existence of such a right.

#### *Object Relations in Postcolonial Discourse on the Right to Development*

Through the production of anti-colonial human rights expertise in the CHR and the Group of Governmental Experts, development therefore came to figure as a collective and individual human right. As the Declaration on the Right to Development was adopted by an overwhelming majority<sup>7</sup> in

<sup>7</sup>GA (1986b). The Declaration was passed by 146 votes to 1, with eight abstentions (against: the United States, abstaining: Denmark, Finland, the Federal Republic of Germany, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Sweden, and the United Kingdom).



the GA in 1986, it marked the culmination of decades of progressive legal interpretation by stipulating the existence of development as an “inalienable human right [of] every human person and all peoples” (GA 1986b, Art. 1.1). In the declaration, development is imagined and affirmed as:

a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom. (GA 1986a, preamble)

Development is therefore defined as a right of both individuals and collectives; it consists in the improvement of well-being and necessitates participation and fair distribution of economic resources.

As an object of human rights expertise, the right to development inscribes into the corpus and practice of international human rights law a stronger connection between human rights in the developing world, the right to self-determination of postcolonial peoples, and a more extensive notion of postcolonial sovereignty. The Declaration on the Right to Development draws on progressive law-making and legal interpretation by postcolonial states in the CHR and the GA by defining the “right of peoples to self-determination” as going beyond the formal independence from colonial powers and amounting to their “right freely to determine their political status and to pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (GA 1986b, preamble). The right to development therefore forges a relation of proximity between anti-colonial international law and human rights by echoing the wording in the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (GA 1960) and the Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation Among States (GA 1970). Similarly, sovereignty of postcolonial states is not understood in narrow formal terms, but as “full and complete sovereignty over all their natural wealth and resources” (GA 1986b, preamble). The historical conditions for such an equation between the economic sovereignty of formerly colonized peoples and their human rights can be found in discursive practices in the GA that centered around the vision of a New International Economic Order (NIEO). These speak of the need for “liberation and (...) effective control” by developing countries, nations and peoples “over their natural resources and economic activities” to overcome “colonial and racial domination,” “foreign occupation,” and the “subject(ion) to economic, political (...) coercion” (GA 1974a,b, 4h, 4e; see also GA 1974c).

As a result of these connections and the colonial experiences that conditioned their historical emergence, the material and institutional conditions for realizing the right to development are also located on the international level. While states have the primary responsibility for realizing the right to development, the Declaration on the Right to Development also establishes that “states have the duty to co-operate with each other” and that they “[should] promote a new international economic order based on sovereign equality, interdependence, mutual interest and co-operation” (Art 3.3). Responsibility for the enjoyment of the right to development in developing countries also lies with the international community and thus with the Global North. Moreover, threats to the right to development and other human rights do not only—or even primarily—stem from the relation between state and citizen. Rather, dangers also lurk in

unequal relations among groups of states, war and armament, economic exploitation of developing countries, unfair terms of trade, and other alien, foreign, or colonial infringements on the self-determination and full sovereignty of postcolonial states. To illustrate, the Declaration on the Right to Development considers that “massive and flagrant violations” of human rights result from things such as:

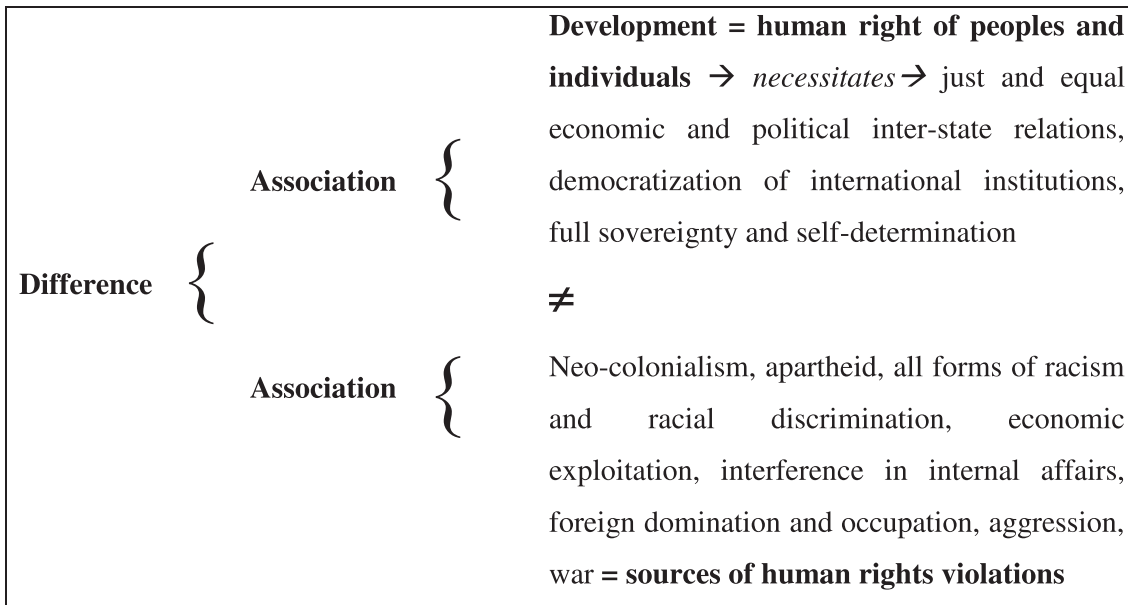
[...] apartheid, all forms of racism and racial discrimination, colonialism, foreign domination and occupation, aggression, foreign interference and threats against national sovereignty, national unity and territorial integrity, threats of war and refusal to recognize the fundamental right of peoples to self-determination. (GA 1986a, preamble; GA 1986a, Art 5)

Economic inequalities also occupy a prominent place in the web of relations that establish and circumscribe the right to development as an object. For instance, the GA resolution that adopted the said declaration speaks of the need “to eliminate economic deprivation, hunger, and disease in all parts of the world” and to maintain “stable and sustainable economic growth [...] increase concessional assistance to developing countries, build food security [and] resolve the debt burden” (GA 1986b, see also SG 1990, 168). In other words, unequal interstate relations and colonial continuities in both political and economic relations constitute sources of human rights violations and obstacles to the realization of human rights.

The political imaginary that the right to development conjures up and emerges from, therefore, contrasts rather sharply with the post-1989 globalization era visions of human rights as international or global norms that the West and/or the international community ought to “export” to the rest of the globe. Instead, human rights as a moral and political language lends legitimacy and urgency to calls for a democratization of international institutions and the postcolonial international community. Thiam’s aforementioned address to the GA provides an instructive illustration in this regard. The speech locates the right to development in an agenda for reorganized, egalitarian political, and economic relations between the Third World and the Global North/West. Addressing the GA in New York in 1966, Thiam asked:

What is our task? We must lay the foundations for a new world society; we must bring about a new revolution; we must tear down all the practices, institutions and rules on which international economic relations are based, in so far as these practices, institutions and rules sanction injustice and exploitation and maintain the unjustified domination of a minority over the majority of men. Not only must we reaffirm our right to development, but we must also take the steps which will enable this right to become a reality. (Doudou Thiam 1966, quoted in Whelan 2015, 94)

Objects that populate this discourse thus entertain relations that may seem unusual to contemporary (Western) human rights experts and practitioners who specialize in other areas of international human rights law and advocacy: Development is a human right of individuals and peoples; violations stem from the international as a realm of state relations marked by military, political, and economic interference and domination; and the realization of development hinges on the reform of international institutions, postcolonial sovereignty, and self-determination.



**Figure 1.** Object relations in right to development discourse

Figure 1 provides a simplified depiction of some of the most important relations of difference and association among objects in UN knowledge production on the right to development.

The establishment of the right to development as an object of expertise was thus accomplished through practices of knowledge production and the forging of new relations between development and human rights. This process of *objectification* and the specific ways in which the right to development orders things across the international/domestic divide made it a constituent part of an anti-colonial imaginary of human rights that would soon lose most of its traction in UN institutions. Thereby, the fierce resistance that this object of human rights expertise would attract in the following decades was hardly conditioned by the *abstract* notion that development constitutes a human right, but by the more specific ways in which it relates development and human rights by locating both objects within an anti-imperial and economically egalitarian postcolonial vision of international order. In this sense, relations are crucial to understanding the lives of objects and their politics.

#### *Forgetting, Transformation, and the Birth of New Objects*

Since the adoption of the Declaration on the Right to Development by the GA in 1986, the right to development has been a source of contestation in international human rights law and the human rights community. States, diplomats, and lawyers of the Global South who continued to advocate for its realization and the creation of a binding legal instrument have for a long time operated at the margins of UN institutions. A large majority of their counterparts in the Global North and the Western world have since adopted a deeply skeptical view, resisting further implementation and legal specification. For the past decades, they challenged the merits of the right to development as an international legal construct and, in particular, sought to avoid any potential redistributive obligations arising from acknowledging the existence of such a collective and individual human right (Marks 2004). In retrospect, the Declaration on the

Right to Development therefore marked the provisional climax of postcolonial reasoning on the relations between development and human rights at the UN, and not the initial impetus for steps toward further institutionalization and implementation through a binding legal instrument that its advocates had envisioned (Villaroman 2011; Whelan 2015; Arts and Tamo 2016). In the decades that followed, the principle of sovereign equality that had informed anti-colonial international law-making and activism, and was central to the set of relations that made it possible for the right to development to assume its specific form, seemed increasingly anachronistic and—to some—even at odds with human rights. As Jean L. Cohen put it, it would soon appear that:

the battle over the international order [was] one between sovereigntists who [were] still enchanted by the state and cosmopolitans who [were] entranced rather by human rights and who [sought] a fundamental revision of the principles of international law and politics. (Cohen, 2012, 485)

In parallel to this story of marginalization and decline in anti-colonial human rights practice, the unipolar world of the mid-1990s and early 2000s saw the rise of a new kind of cosmopolitan human rights optimism. As critical theorists from Costas Douzinas (2003, 2007) to Slavoj Žižek (2005) and Wendy Brown (2004) observed, human rights seemed to constitute the most suitable candidate for a universal language and moral aspiration capable of uniting a globalizing humanity and overcoming the old curse of politics and international conflict.

At the UN, new problem constructions started circulating and gaining traction in the early years of the post-Cold War period. Rather than asking how relations between countries and regions of the world could be reformed to further human rights and realize the right to development in the Global South, the underpinning question animating much discussion in these years was instead how governing practices of international institutions could become more “human-,” and “people-centered,” and how they could



be grounded in human rights. “Human security,” “humanitarian intervention,” “human development,” and similar objects emerged as responses to this newfound necessity and global cosmopolitan sentiment (Kaldor, 2007; Orford, 2003; Ziai, 2016). This quest to make human rights bear upon governing practices beyond the traditional human rights machinery also marked political efforts during the UN reform process. In 1997, General Secretary Kofi Annan’s report *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform* stressed that “human rights are integral to the promotion of peace and security, economic prosperity and social equality” and described it as a “a major task for the United Nations [to] fully integrate [human rights] it into the broad range of the Organization’s activities” (GA 1997, 78–9; 2005).

At the nexus of human rights and development, this *problématique* of governing through and for humanity and its rights gave rise to new practices aimed at “integrating human rights in development programming, and the realization of human rights through development programming” (UNDP, 2012, n.p.). With time, these practices became bundled and objectified in a highly institutionalized and authoritative object of expertise: the HRBA. The HRBA was created by UN development and human rights organizations in the early 2000s as a way to further institutionalize, specify, and streamline the different human rights-based methodologies that had mushroomed in various corners of the humanitarian-development nexus into one common UN approach (UNDG 2003; Uvin 2004; OHCHR 2006). Today, the HRBA is a compulsory methodology for all organizations in the UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG). It constitutes the topic of innumerable action guides, toolkits, fact sheets, evaluations, and best practice reports. Specialized units and funds within the UNSDG are dedicated to its implementation,<sup>8</sup> and it forms a central methodological and normative component of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNSDG 2019, 2022a,b; UN 2020, 2021).

#### *Objects Relations in Knowledge Production on the HRBA*

In the present, the HRBA therefore provides an authoritative answer to the question of how development and human rights relate. As an object of specialized knowledge, it is continuously (re)produced and enacted in the practices within the UNSDG: in policy documents and technical guidance, as well as in the design, conduct and evaluation of programs that UN organizations roll out in developing countries. The HRBA also functions as a reference point in the broader discourse on the need to integrate human rights in development that proliferates across international institutions, bilateral donor agencies, NGOs, and academic institutions (Kindornay, Ron, and Carpenter 2012; Miller and Redhead 2019). The HRBA encapsulates the historically *novel* idea that “[a]ll programmes of development cooperation, policies, and technical assistance should further the realization of human rights” (UNSDG 2022a, n.p.). In other words, the HRBA renders human rights actionable; it translates this multifaceted and contested object into something that UN organizations and other actors can draw upon and perform. Interestingly for our purposes here, the relations of “resemblance, proximity, distance, difference, transformation” (Foucault 1972, 44) among objects that the HRBA forges and that enable it to appear as a namable, discernable entity

contrast rather sharply with the anti-colonial discourse that I discussed above.

First, HRBA locates the true aim of development practices in the fulfillment of human rights rather than in “development” as a such. As an OHCHR fact sheet on the HRBA explains: “as development policies and programmes are formulated, the main objective should be to fulfil human rights” (OHCHR 2006, 15; UNSDG 2017). Human rights are therefore both analytically and normatively prior in the practice of HRBA: They “delineate the ‘playing field’ in which development takes place,” help “understand underlying and root causes of development problems,” and “improve the quality of outcomes and processes” (UNSDG 2017, session 4, ppt, slide 5, 10). In this sense, the HRBA reflects an attempt to draw on human rights to improve and legitimize development as a normative objective and analytical framework: The HRBA “brings depth and legitimacy to [UN] practice,” and it has both a “normative” and an “instrumental value” (UNSDG 2017, Facilitation Guide, 24, 30, session 4, ppt, slide 6, 7).

Second, UN practices of HRBA associate the process of development with power and politics, inequalities, marginalization, discrimination, vulnerability, and exclusion. To take another example from the wealth of UNSDG documentations and instruction materials on the topic, conducting HRBA means “analyzing and addressing the inequalities, discriminatory practices and unjust power relations that are often at the heart of development problems” (UNSDG 2017, session 6, ppt slides 9, 13, comment). In more concrete terms, overcoming “patterns of discrimination, exclusion and powerlessness” (UNSDG 2017, session 5, ppt, slide 7) through HRBA requires development actors to identify groups of “rights holders” who are at risk of being “left behind” (UNSDG 2022a,b). In addition, corresponding “duty bearers” are identified through recourse to international legal instruments and intricate analyses of social relations among actors whom UN organizations encounter in developing countries (“role pattern analysis,” for a recent and elaborate account, see UNSDG 2022a, 30–6). Given the structure of international (human rights) law that provides the conditions of possibility for these practices, heterogeneous social institutions that can be categorized as incarnations of the local, developing state most frequently assume the role of duty bearers: from ministries and parliaments to village councils (for examples, see UNSSC 2010; UNDP 2012; UNDG 2013; UN 2021). The subsequent design of interventions and programs focuses on the lacking “capacities” of these two actor groups in claiming and protecting human rights (“capacity analysis” or “capacity gap analysis,” UNSDG 2022a, 30–7). It identifies ways in which UN organizations can educate, mobilize, and otherwise engage these groups so as to improve their abilities to assess their social context in the language of the HRBA and promote positive societal change:

By developing the capacities of rights-holders we [the UN] are empowering them to claim their rights. [...] By developing the capacity of the State to respect, protect and fulfil, the State institutions and government officials become more accountable. (UNSDG 2017, session 4, ppt, slide 14)

As an object of practical expertise on how to conduct development programs in accordance with human rights, HRBA locates obstacles to development and threats to human rights in detrimental local practices and lacking abilities of actors in developing countries. Overcoming these dangers necessitates a “review of policies and laws to assess

<sup>8</sup>Such as the UNSDG interagency Task Team on Human Rights, LNOB and the Normative Agenda, the UNSDG Human Rights Mainstreaming Mechanism (UN HRM), and the Human Rights Mainstreaming Multi-Donor Trust Fund (HRM Fund).

consistency with global human rights standards” (UNSDG 2017, session 5, ppt, slide 16). The HRBA therefore posits and enacts a hierarchical imaginary where “human rights” are conceived and drawn upon as a set of neutral, universal norms, values and principles crystallizing in the international/global realm that developing society should aspire to resemble:

The HRBA is based on [...] human rights principles and standards that provide a common standard of achievement for all men women and children and all nations. (UNSDG 2017, session 4, ppt, slide 6)

As UNSDG educational material on the HRBA emphasizes: Given that “development isn’t power neutral [...], power-relations have a huge impact on who we are” and “given the political realities around power, one is in need of an objective and neutral normative standard” (UNSDG 2017, session 3, Power Walk—option 2, p. 2). Moreover, HRBA discourse forges close connections between human rights and international institutions, who are positioned as messengers and carriers of universal human rights normativity. The UN has a unique “normative mandate” and “impartiality to deal with sensitive issues,” so that UN staff in countries can “leveraged the normative authority of human rights in their development work” (UNDG 2013, 3, 5, 11, 26, 37; UNSDG 2017, session 4, ppt, slide 6).

This stands in sharp contrast with the postcolonial vision of development as a human right and social process that increases individual and collective well-being that the right to development conjured up and fortified through its objectual character. If the right to development was based on experiences of political struggles over the shape of international order and attempts to overcome institutionalized inequalities between the Global North and South, the HRBA imagines international institutions, and the UN in particular, as actors uniquely capable and normatively positioned to guide developing countries and societies away from discrimination and power relations toward the realization of human rights and development for those “left behind.” Despite the emphasis on uncovering power relations and empowering the actors with whom UN organizations interact, the HRBA makes sense of the relation between human rights and development within a hierarchical vision that privileges international/global norms and knowledge while seeking to improve and remold developing societies in their image.

Figure 2 provides a simplified depiction of object relations in UN knowledge production on the HRBA.

### Conclusions

In this article, I examined competing objects of expertise that are produced and put to work by IOs. Based on extensive documentary research that reached across various UN archives and contemporary sites, I explored the politics of UN expertise at the nexus of human rights and development. My empirical story and the theoretical resources from Foucauldian archeology and political ontology that I mobilize lend themselves to thinking through how objects that populate the world of international institutions *relate* and how they are shaped by—or better: emerge from—relations. More specifically, I sought to shed light upon how the hybrid and boundary-spanning objects of specialized knowledge that take center stage in this special issue unfold world-making effects and constitute international politics by relating more elusive and encompassing governance objects such as “human rights” and “development” in different ways. Empirically, I fleshed out and explored this train of thought by showing how the HRBA and the right to development

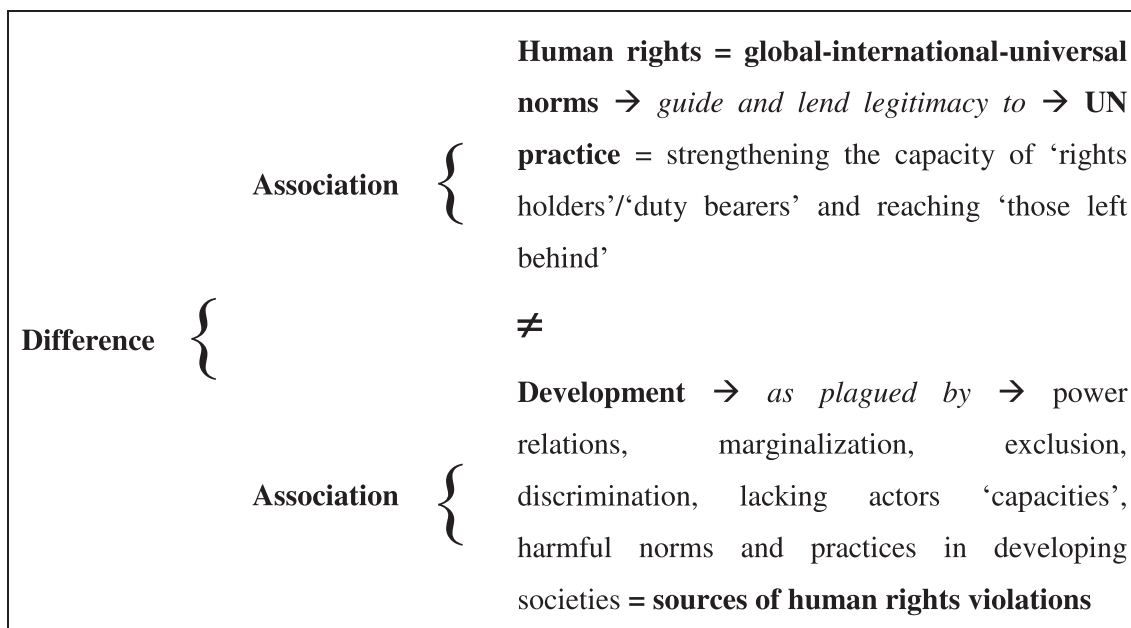
make sense of “human rights” and “development” within starkly contrasting, hierarchical, and anti-colonial visions of international order.

Today, the HRBA and the right to development entertain a curious, distanced relationship, proliferating in different corners of UN discourse despite their many contradictions. The HRBA is at the core of the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The technical focus on multiple and overlapping vulnerabilities that it pioneered in the early 2000s permeates policy discourse and technical expertise in the UN development system, while the HRBA itself figures as the logical, practical corollary of the principle of “leaving no one behind” (UNSDG 2022a). At the same time, the right to development is experiencing a humble, burgeoning renaissance through work on a legally binding convention that is currently conducted under UN auspice. Once more, these efforts were initiated by UN member states of the Global South and the Non-Aligned Movement, while Western states have shown little support for the endeavor (Teshome 2022). The draft convention that is currently being negotiated builds on preparatory work conducted by the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Right to Development by the former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development, Mr. Saad Alfarargi, and the technical-legal craftsmanship of five independent legal experts who comprised the official drafting group (HRC 2018, 2020, 2022; De Negri Filho 2022; Nakagiri 2022).

In this paper, I did not aim to investigate the relative agency of different actors, such as IOs and member states, or independent expert bodies and intergovernmental human rights bodies, in the creation and realization of human rights norms (see my discussion on p. 7). But my analysis of the right to development and the described circumstances of current attempts to codify this human right in a binding legal instrument nonetheless corroborate the existing consensus in the human rights literature about the more openly politicized and contentious nature of interstate human rights institutions and state-driven human rights discourse. My analysis of UN discourse on the HRBA also confirms the well-established notion that IOs “work hard” to present their own work as apolitical by alluding to technical expertise as they seek to navigate difficult political waters and bolster their own authority amidst divergent state preferences—hence the emphasis on “neutral” knowledge and “universal” norms.

However, my object-oriented archeological account of right to development and HRBA also complicate these standard narratives about the workings of human rights expertise. As the historical emergence of the right to development as an international legal concept and the current process of drafting a binding convention on the right to development both illustrate, the boundary between intergovernmental human rights bodies and independent expert groups is often far from clear cut: While intergovernmental human rights bodies (CHR and HRC) establish both intergovernmental and independent expert groups and mandates, independent experts appear before the former, deliver reports, draft conventions, and advise state representatives. More broadly, my ambition in this article was to show that, and explore how, seemingly technical objects of expert knowledge co-constitute competing political imaginaries and visions of international order. In other words, I sought to throw light on the political work that objects perform and to illustrate that human rights expertise has world-making qualities, even in the absence of overt consensus among actors.

Now, what, if anything, can we learn from this story about the right to development and the HRBA to grapple with



**Figure 2.** Object relations in HRBA discourse

broader questions around the politics of knowledge? In my mind, the contested genealogy and recent resurfacing of the right to development in international human rights law illustrate that objects of expertise have world-making qualities by virtue of their ontological interrelations, yet it also points to the fact that (some) objects are surprisingly *sticky*. This is another reason why they matter. There is, of course, some room for reinterpretation and discontinuity, for “struggles, plundering, disguises, ploys” (Foucault 1977, 139). But meaning does not float freely, and it cannot be deliberately (re)invented by actors. Like a tool constructed for a specific purpose, there are limits to repurposing: The right to development, once forged and objectified, evokes a certain set of relations. In a time of heightened geopolitical rivalry and reemerging bloc politics, current discussions on a binding legal convention on the right to development therefore summon the specter of Third Worldism and its vision of solidarity among politically and economically independent peoples of the Global South.

This notion of stickiness can also help in making sense of the strange distance that has characterized the relation between HRBA and the right to development in UN discourse throughout recent decades. Despite the obvious thematic overlap between these two notions and the set of practices that form around them (i.e., the fact that they both forge relations between human rights and development in a way that few, if any, other objects of UN expertise do), discourses on HRBA generally make little reference to the right to development and vice versa. When they do, it tends to take the form of parenthetical or formal “recognition” rather than substantial engagement (for illustrations, see OHCHR 2006; HRC 2022; UNSDG 2022a). As I argued above, the historical writing-out of the right to development in HRBA discourse cannot be seen as a result of the *abstract* notion that development constitutes a human right. Instead, a relational and object-oriented approach points us to the specific ways in which the right to development relates development and human rights within an anti-imperial and economically egalitarian postcolonial vision of international order as a much

more plausible reason for its marginalization and exclusion. Therefore, objects and their interrelations are crucial to understanding (human rights) expertise and its politics in international institutions.

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