

From Nation States to International Organizations: Technical Assistance as a Political and Diplomatic Instrument

“I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life.” This is how President Harry Truman introduced his new developmental program during his 1948 inaugural address. Indeed, technology has always been at the heart of a nation’s aspiration and a major way of political influence. But Truman’s ambition went beyond the state. Helping the “free peoples of the world” ought to be a collaborative project “in which all nations work together through the United Nations and its Specialized Agencies wherever practicable.” As he argued “It must be a world-wide effort for the achievement of peace, plenty, and freedom.” A year later the United Nations established the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance (EPTA) as a way to assist governments and their people to “move into the twentieth century.”

This paper goes beyond individual nation states and brings front and center the role of international organizations in using technology as a political and diplomatic instrument on a global level. It draws on some of the UN’s Technical Assistance programs, focusing especially on the IAEA, WHO, and UNESCO. For more than 70 years myriad of material devices and technologies, large and small, have been literally crossing continents forming the backbones of TA programs and designed to advance the UN’s and its specialized agencies developing goals. Yet, this kind of material-based diplomacy characteristic of the United Nations technical aid along with the strong demand for mobile and flexible technologies have been largely ignored.

Maria Rentetzi

Maria Rentetzi is professor of Science, Technology, and Gender Studies (STGS) at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg and an affiliate of the Max Planck Institute for History of Science, Berlin, Germany. She has published extensively on the politically and historically situated character of technoscience and used gender as a major analytic category in her work. She also received a major ERC research grant for

her project on the role of the IAEA in the history of radiation protection. Her latest monograph is *Seduced by Radium: How Industry Transformed Science in the American Marketplace* (2022) while she also edited *The Gender of Things: How Epistemic and Technological Objects Become Gendered* (Routledge, 2024). She serves also as the internationalization officer of FAU.