In September 2000, the United Nations (UN) presented the ‘Millennium Development Goals’, a universal political agenda to tackle what it perceived to be the most pressing problems of the coming century. The Millennium Development Goals featured strategies for the fight against extreme poverty, hunger and malnutrition, the improvement of public health, the protection of the environment and the build-up of global developmental structures and partnerships. The achievement of these goals was scheduled, somewhat optimistically, for 2015. The brief time span was intended to illustrate the urgency of the issues and to spur the world into action. Just over a decade after their announcement, and not unexpectedly, the realisation of these goals has proved to be fraught with problems and by now the prospect of their universal achievement has receded into the distant future.1 Despite huge publicity and public endorsement, the UN’s expectations for progress or at least alleviation of major problems are now difficult to maintain as the situation has been exacerbated by global food, economic and financial crises. Comprehensive global success stories, such as the eradication of certain infectious diseases, are rare.2 As the UN’s progress


2 Famously, the global eradication of smallpox was accomplished three decades ago. The announcement by the UN of the eradication of cattle plague (rinderpest), the disease responsible for severe losses of livestock in past centuries, is apparently to be expected in the course of 2011. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), ‘Progress report on rinderpest eradication efforts as of October 2010. Success stories and actions required prior to the Global Declaration in 2011’ available at http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/46383icode/ (last visited 8 March 2011).
review shows, the close and complex entwinement of these problems within the
context of globalisation remains a major challenge.

Epidemic diseases, environmental degradation and human welfare are not new
challenges for international organisations. Rather, as this volume highlights, the
articulation of global agricultural, economical and public health issues as increasingly
interlinked and unified targets for international co-operation came to the fore as
early as the inter-war years. Such problems, often long-term consequences of agro-
economic modernisation and the rapid expansion of global trade since the late
nineteenth century, were aggravated by the world economic crisis of the 1930s.
The need for co-operation on trade and labour issues, food safety and the spread
of diseases, and on the problems of nutrition and environmental degradation in
the context of an increasingly tense international climate, gave rise to a panoply of
international associations and networks which are at the heart of this volume. A
case in point is the League of Nation’s attempt, in the wake of the world economic
crisis, to promote an integrated approach to economic, agricultural and health issues
in order to solve problems of agricultural overproduction on the one hand, and
malnutrition and poverty on the other. The debates in Geneva demonstrated that
the close interconnection of these areas made it particularly difficult to handle them
effectively, and that sectoral solutions were insufficient. These debates at the League of
Nations are only one of a multitude of examples of international co-operation and the
elaboration of international discourses and practices on border-crossing phenomena
connected to food, health, agriculture and the environment in the first half of the
twentieth century. However, scholars have rarely addressed these topics with a view to
their thematic and methodical connections and the mutual influences between them.
The present volume offers a fresh perspective on the roots of co-operation on agro-
economic issues, public health, nutrition and environmental exploitation in the first
half of the twentieth century. It is an attempt to draw out the historical significance,
and the shifts and continuities in the shape and functioning of international networks,
to suggest connections between them and critically to review the apparently inherent
progressive motors of transnational co-operation.4

3 The idea was put forward to the League Assembly in September 1935 by the Australian delegate
and former Prime Minister Stanley M. Bruce. Société des Nations, Actes de la Seizième Session
Ordinaire de l’Assemblée, Séances Plénières, Compte-rendu des débats, Quatrième Séance Plénière
(11 septembre 1935), Journal Officiel de la Société des Nations, Supplément Spécial No. 138 (Genève: Société
des Nations, 1935), 52. Amy L. S. Staples [Sayward], The Birth of Development: How the World Bank,
Food and Agriculture Organization, and World Health Organization Changed the World, 1945–1965 (Kent,

4 Most papers in this special issue were first presented at a conference held in Oxford in June 2009,
organised as a joint project by the Cluster of Excellence ‘Asia and Europe in a Global Context’
(University of Heidelberg) and the Modern European History Research Centre (University of Oxford).
The participants set out to explore overlaps between several specialist disciplines of historical research
and to discuss the methodological and thematic entanglements of the theme areas with a time frame
reaching from the late nineteenth century to the reorganisation of global co-operation after the Second
World War. We gratefully acknowledge the inputs of the chairs and panellists at the workshop: Sunil
Amrith, Patricia Clavin, Madeleine Herren, David Lewis and Corinne Pernet.
As every historian who has sat in the archives of an international organisation knows, the multitude of actors and institutions involved in international networking during the inter-war years and the diversity of problems they addressed are not for the faint-hearted. An idea of the sheer breadth and vitality of inter-war international networking activities can be gained by consulting the League’s serial publication, the Handbook of International Organizations, which reveals the impressive dimensions of international liaisons during the 1920s and 1930s.5 As the exhaustive lists of sometimes obscure international associations and organisations in the handbooks indicate, the multiple layers of transnational contacts in the fields of agriculture, environment, food and health and their governmental and non-governmental, scientific, political, economic and social influences is clearly a methodological challenge and can hardly be grasped, let alone described, by a single pair of eyes. By focusing on the surge of technical and scientific co-operation, the contributions in this volume explore the motivations that underpinned individual networks and their interactions. They view the inter-war years as a formative rather than a ‘transitional epoch’ of global entanglements in international affairs, characterised by the close intersection of international welfare issues, the establishment of systematic information exchange and the pursuit of economic interests.6 Accordingly, the 1930s in particular emerge as a period of growing international efforts rather than an era of decline in transnational co-operation.

As exemplified by the Millennium Development Goals, the search for an integrated international approach to agriculture, environment, food and health features prominently on today’s political agenda. This current public and political interest has stimulated curiosity about the genealogy of these issues and the historical development of the agencies involved. In historical scholarship, research in such sub-disciplines as environmental history, economic history, history of science and medicine, and rural history has for a long time concentrated on regional, national and comparative studies. In the last few years, however, new research in these fields has been influenced by concepts such as ‘connected histories’, ‘entangled histories’ and ‘new global history’ used to describe interconnections and transboundary exchange.7 Food trade and food policies, for instance, have become the themes of groundbreaking international and global histories,8 whereas the environment and agriculture are emerging as fundamental topics for the understanding of environmental management

5 The content of the League of Nations Handbook of International Organizations series and the networking of international organisations can be explored via the research database LONSEA (University of Heidelberg): www.lonsea.org (last visited 8 March 2011).
and knowledge transfer within colonial and imperial systems. Accordingly, recent attempts to historicise and contextualise modernisation policies and programmes have produced exciting new insights into a global history of modernisation. Yet, it is in particular the field of transnational history that has provided a number of significant insights. As a result, international organisations and transnational civil society movements are now routinely discussed. In particular the work of the League of Nations has come into focus: no longer a synonym for diplomatic failure, the League’s economic and social impact has received much attention in the last ten years or so. Yet, whereas the League’s nutrition and public health


10 Focusing on local case studies, single countries and often single development projects, these histories of modernisation claim to offer the best perspective on the principal actors in a given moment, without, however, acknowledging the role of international agencies. See David C. Engermann and Corinna R. Unger, ‘Introduction: Towards a Global History of Modernisation’, Diplomatic History, 33, 3 (June 2009), 380.


policies have attracted interest for at least two decades, economic, agricultural and environmental co-operation still remain rather marginal topics. To be sure, historical interest in international organisations has also extended to other agencies, such as the International Labour Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization and, not least, the UN, whose specific history and organisational features have become the subject of numerous studies. Yet this research on international organisations and co-operation has often resulted in institutional histories. The interactions between official and private international bodies and networks are rarely addressed, and the complex entanglement of such diverse actors as international associations, national governments, business companies and expert communities are only discussed at the margins. There have been only a few attempts to bring together research on thematic issues or clusters, despite the advantages of such an approach. Even a rather large thematic focus (as in the present issue) enables us to overcome the sometimes narrow


methodological and historiographical boundaries of specialist subjects and to broaden our vision of international co-operation in the twentieth century, thus contributing to a cultural and social rather than an institutional or political history.

By focusing on international issues rather than institutions, most of the essays in this volume foreground the role of networks and transnational platforms. The interactions with other organisations, personal networks and economic agencies thus take centre stage. This results not in a hierarchical approach to political power relationships, but in a horizontal description of the relationships and interactions between actors, groups and institutions across borders with a particular focus on processes of information exchange and transfer. In all the papers, the role of ‘expert’ knowledge and activities emerge as central to the understanding of international processes. Their analysis helps to historicise ‘epistemic communities’ by illuminating the origins and character of these expert communities. The investigation of international expert activities not only reveals the demands for expert knowledge from national and international administrations, it also sheds light on the semi-official character of specialist groups, their relationships and interconnections with other (often private) interest groups, and the role of internationalism in processes of scientific professionalisation. The experts under discussion often bridged various scientific domains such as public health and veterinary medicine or agriculture and nutrition, underlining their own multiple interests and scientific pursuits as well as the permeable boundaries of scientific, medical, agrarian and economic international issues and networks. These protagonists also personify the sometimes constructive, sometimes problematic relationship between the national and international spheres.

This is not to suggest, however, that international co-operation naturally reflects a heightened sense of shared values and a progressive drive towards the greater common good. Unsurprisingly, the different approaches in this volume shed light on a wide variety of motors and motivations. A number of key issues emerge in all contributions: modernisation and globalisation, even if not explicitly addressed,

function as a backdrop to most of the processes described. The resulting opportunities and especially the problems are at the heart of many debates. Concerns with social reforms, human rights and human welfare emerge as factors inspiring international exchange and co-operation. This is exemplified through the large number of international conferences and congresses, which acted as dynamic arenas where issues perceived as challenges of ‘modernity’ were debated and plans for international co-operation articulated. Yet such gatherings also constituted ‘platforms of dispute’, places of entanglements reflecting the growing need for co-operation as well as the growing competition in acquiring knowledge and economic advantages.

Thus, as the responses to dangers arising from border-crossing diseases prominently illustrate, the major goals of common regulation, standardisation and information transfer were often motivated by pragmatic ideas of exchange rather than by creating world peace. Cornelia Knab shows how international efforts to combat animal diseases and epizootics caused long-term challenges for international economic relations and public health co-operation. Although the problematic spread of animal disease agents beyond national borders urgently called for common international arrangements, it proved to be difficult for international bodies such as the Office International des Epizooties (OIE) to acquire agency beyond their role as platforms for intergovernmental negotiations. The ever-shifting position of veterinary matters between economics and public health further hampered the search for international solutions, and international co-operation against animal diseases, was often mitigated by national agro-economic interests. Georg von Graevenitz takes the example of the world sugar market to investigate economic internationalism, conceptually situated between policies of national protectionism and international free trade in the inter-war period. Graevenitz shows how sugar internationalism profoundly changed during the Great Depression. The activities of transnational networks in sugar policies and the different role of transnational agreements for sugar trade policies in Europe and in Java reveal the economic ambivalences of transnational networking and illustrate the blurred boundaries between transnational concepts and intergovernmental policy.

The chronological focus of all the papers helps to map out the shifts and continuities of transnational networks throughout the twentieth century and in particular to illuminate the inter-war years as a formative period in this respect. What is more, the impact of wars, conventionally regarded as watersheds in international relations, seems to fade against the overarching experience of the Great Depression. In fact, rather than subscribing to the conventional view of the ‘rise and fall of international co-operation’ in the inter-war years, most papers describe an acceleration and reinvigoration of international activities in the late 1930s, not least due to an increase in public interest. As Amalia Ribhi Forclaz shows when reviewing the campaign of the International Labour Organization (ILO) to reform rural labour, it is only during the economic crisis of the 1930s that the ILO’s work on agriculture took off. The combination of increasing publicity, economic necessity and scientific advances in the related fields of agricultural economy, nutrition and labour policy led to a decisive shift in attitudes towards agricultural work which laid the ground for a
more integrated approach towards the rural sector in the post-war years. In contrast to other areas addressed by transnational networks, it was only after the First World War that environmental issues entered international arenas on a large scale. Anna-Katharina Wöbse analyses the beginnings of environmental work within the scientific section of UNESCO and its relations with the non-governmental International Union for the Protection of Nature (IUPN). The International Technical Conference on the Protection of Nature, convened in 1949, revealed the growing dependencies between environmental issues and the areas of nutrition, health and development, while making plain that environmental matters directly concerned the future of humankind.

To some extent, all contributions in this volume also explore the scope of the ‘international sphere’ and implicitly map a specific geographical landscape of internationalism that focuses on Europe. They also show, however, that the Eurocentric boundaries of internationalism were undergoing significant changes in the inter-war years as the formulation of issues with global relevance increasingly entailed co-operation and confrontation with the wider world. As most papers would suggest, the centre of international co-operation underwent a decisive shift from a focus on Europe and the West to a more global arena towards the end of the inter-war years and to a fully fledged embrace of the universal character of environmental challenges in the immediate post-war years. Future historical research will need to focus even more on the limits and outreach of international co-operation, on participation in and exclusion from decision processes, on political implementation and public reception and, ultimately, on the question of power. In other words, the transnational approach to international organisations and networks needs to be refined to include the interrelationship between and adaptability of the international norms and policies described here and local or regional developments. This will also aid reflection on the problematic Eurocentric approach to international co-operation and on the question of whether the history of international organisation is part of a wider narrative of modernity or whether it can shed light on the presence of ‘multiple modernities’.

The contributions in this volume make a start in uncovering the extent and formative influence of the wide variety of actors involved in promoting transnational co-operation in the fields of agriculture, food, economy and the environment. As their thematic reflections on the evolution of transnational issues transcend national borders, they reveal not only the overlaps between these fields but also the motivations, interactions, connections and competitions which accompanied this process. Ultimately, they illuminate the advances and setbacks, shifts and continuities in human societies’ quest for social and economic progress. As the set date for achieving the Millennium Goals draws nearer, historians can offer a salutary


reminder that international organisations have always suffered from a characteristic combination of high expectations and limited power. As arenas of co-operation and debate, data exchange and standard-setting, their success will always depend on the agenda, expertise and influence of governmental and non-governmental networks.