Alfred Maizels, who has died aged 89, made distinguished contributions to the international literature on trade and development and was a formative influence on the approach of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) towards the problems of developing countries. He was held in great esteem not only by his fellow economists but also by policy makers and officials in the developing world. The Indian Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, spoke for many of them when he said how ‘deeply saddened he was by the death of a brilliant economist who had devoted his life to promoting the development of poor countries’.

Maizels was born in Whitechapel in 1917 the third child of a Jewish master tailor who had emigrated from Poland before the First World War. He went to Raine’s Foundation School in Bethnal Green and then to the London School of Economics, graduating with first class honours in 1937 and carrying off the Farr Medal and Prize in Statistics as well. He also met the sociologist Joan Sidey at LSE and they married on May Day in 1942.

Maizels stayed on at LSE for two years in the Research Department as an assistant to both Professor von Hayek and Evan Durbin, two brilliant men at opposite ends of the political spectrum. The contrast no doubt appealed to Maizels’ tolerant nature and sense of humour but there is no doubt that his sympathies were with Durbin, and especially with Durbin’s 1945 riposte to Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom*.

In early 1941 Maizels joined Brian Reddaway and Evan Durbin at the Board of Trade where, in a remarkably short time, they designed the clothing rationing scheme which, according to A J P Taylor, was the most successful of all such systems and a striking instance of how welfare considerations could be upheld despite the privations of wartime. Maizels recalled that they had been given a head-start by British Intelligence who had got hold of a copy of the German rationing plan: ‘it was not bad but we thought we could do a lot better’!

In 1950 he was seconded to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) in Geneva where Gunnar Myrdal had attracted a galaxy of economists from all over Europe and the United States. Maizels’ task was to take over from W.W. Rostow a major study of the European timber industry, then a crucial sector in the European recovery programme. His careful analysis of the supply and demand for timber was an outstanding piece of work that laid the basis for effectual cooperation among timber producers that continues to this day. It had all the qualities that would characterise his work throughout a long career: a clear analytical framework setting out the nature of the problem and why it mattered, a meticulous attention to digging out the facts and getting them right, and a pragmatic approach to policy recommendations which paid attention to the politically feasible.

Returning to London Maizels found the Board of Trade worrying (yet again) about the possible impact of industrialisation in the developing (then largely colonial) world on Britain’s own position in the world economy. This led to his secondment to the National Institute of Economic and Social Research in London and to his magisterial *Industrial Growth and World Trade* (1963), a detailed, empirical and historical analysis of the changing structure of world trade in industrial goods in response to industrialisation and rising per capita incomes. His conclusion was optimistic in that he showed that the industrialisation of primary producing countries was generally accompanied by an expansion of imports of manufactures from the developed countries, but he stressed that the relationship was a complex, interactive one in which macro-economic policies as well as technology and a range of other factors were crucial. Whether a developed country’s industries would suffer from increased imports of manufactures from the South would depend on their adaptability and whether the country was already caught in a vicious circle of slow growth and declining competitiveness; whether a developing country could trigger a virtuous circle of trade and growth would depend on a much wider range of factors and policies than simple trade liberalisation. Maizels was never one to be beguiled by short cuts and quick fixes. This book, for which he received his doctorate from LSE, is still quoted by historians and trade specialists, and is still relevant to current debates about globalisation.

Maizels stayed on at the NIESR where his second book, *Exports and Economic Growth of Developing Countries*, appeared in 1968 to highly complimentary reviews but by then he had left for Geneva where Raúl Prebisch had persuaded him to join the newly created UNCTAD.

Maizels crafted UNCTAD’s basic approach to commodity policy and developed the idea of a Common Fund for stabilising commodity prices, a proposal that was close to Keynes’ 1942 Plan for the International Regulation of Commodities, although, like most economists, he was unaware of the similarity as Keynes’ proposal was only rediscovered in 1973. Maizels had published in the 1968 *American Economic Review* a powerful attack on the neoliberal view that commodity price fluctuations were not harmful for the economic growth of developing countries. He showed that they were very damaging and argued that government intervention in the commodity markets was both possible and desirable if developing countries were to diversify their economies and trigger a process of sustained growth. Trade economists often exaggerate the influence of trade and trade policy in promoting development, but Maizels always saw commodity policies as part of a more
comprehensive strategy in which countries set their own priorities within a macroeconomic policy framework designed by themselves rather than the IFIs.

The Common Fund was UNCTAD’s flagship for the New International Economic Order which ultimately proved unsuccessful, largely because the western industrial countries were unwilling to contemplate measures that might raise commodity prices and, more generally, because they were increasingly reluctant on ideological grounds to ‘buck the market’. Maizels had few illusions about how the NIEO and Common Fund proposals would eventually turn out. Professor Gerry Helleiner recalls him saying that, in the end, the objections of the OECD countries to them were not really intellectual; rather they reflected their deep fear of losing their power to shape the global economy in their own interests, something they would never willingly relinquish. Needless to say, his instincts proved accurate.

Maizels was Director of Economic Policy Evaluation and Coordination in UNCTAD between 1974 and his retirement in 1980. He drafted virtually all the Secretary General’s speeches in this period and his insistence on solid argument and empirical evidence influenced the work of every division in the organisation. His firm belief in the importance of evidence-based policy proposals was reflected in his active promotion of sound economic research, both within UNCTAD and elsewhere, on the whole range of problems facing the developing countries in their efforts to participate in the world economy. He invited distinguished outsiders, by no means all of them sympathetic to UNCTAD’s views, to criticise UNCTAD research and suggest alternative approaches. He also sought to bring economic research institutions in developing countries together, both to trade experiences with one another and to enrich UNCTAD’s own work.

Maizels retired from the United Nations in 1980 but promptly took up a succession of research fellowships at University College, London, the UN World Institute for Development Economic Research (WIDER) in Helsinki, and at Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford. In 2004 he was appointed Professorial Research Fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. In these years he published some twenty-five papers and two books, one of them, Commodities in Crisis (1992), reflecting decades of thinking about commodity problems and regarded by many as the definitive work on the subject. He also did groundbreaking work on the terms of trade of labour-intensive manufactures, finding similar trends to those that Prebisch and Singer had observed for primary commodities, and was one of the first to warn of the dangers for developing countries of excessive competition and consequent income losses in such markets, dangers that were amplified by the persistent protectionism of the developed countries.

Alfred Maizels was a man of extremely modest demeanour, but he was held in enormous respect by his professional colleagues. Ministers and diplomats from developing countries admired him for his integrity and his judgement, and they recognised that his work was always ultimately driven by a concern for social justice and a deep compassion for the poor and the disadvantaged. They trusted him - and that was why he was a very influential member of the UN secretariat.

He will be remembered not only as a fine scholar and an outstanding international civil servant but also as a greatly admired and much-loved human being. He was unfailingly kind and courteous to his colleagues and everyone he met. Young economists, with much to learn, held him in especially high regard. He possessed that rare and precious gift that Charles Dickens once described as ‘the ability to see the world clearly with kind eyes’.

He is survived by his wife Joan, his three children, five grandchildren, two great grandchildren, and his younger sister.

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