

From Process to People: The Challenge of Change at the United Nations in the New Millennium

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What is a Clinical Psychology Ph.D. student doing at a conference dedicated to UN reform and the Millennium Development Goals? This question seemed to be hanging on the lips of my fellow attendees, mostly international relations and political science students, when encountering me in their midst. The answer to their unspoken question kept burning inside me throughout the three days. It is only now, with the symposium behind me, that I am finally able to call upon logic in order to rein in my passion. My response parallels my viewpoint on the very theme of the conference.

The consideration of psychological phenomenon in policy development at an international level would address many of the concerns voiced at the symposium relating to pathologies existing in the UN. Such concerns include the homogeneity of decision makers and need for a greater inclusion of individuals at the grassroots level in policy making. Psychology addresses the attitudes and behavior of the individual and how this individual functions in society. Policy development on a global level addresses the operation of societies as a whole in terms of politics, economics, and international relations. As societies are composed of individuals, are psychology and international policy development not interdependent disciplines? I recognized three recurring themes throughout the symposium:

- The need for innovative means of achieving UN reform and the Millennium Development Goals
- Ways to lessen the human and financial resources spent on bureaucracy at the UN
- Soliciting more direct input in policy development from the grassroots level.

I would like to offer the diversification of UN staff, specifically the inclusion of psychology, as a means to achieve a greater consideration of individuals in policy development who will be

directly affected by the decisions, and a more efficient means of striving towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals through a focus on more precise and realistic targets.

Jean-Marc Coicaud (Director, United Nations University, ATHGO International Symposium, 25/04/06) highlighted diversity and innovation as vital ingredients for effective UN reform. In a recent survey, UN employees reported a lack of trust among staff members and ethnocentric attitudes displayed by senior management (Deloitte Consulting LLP, 2004). It is these types of interpersonal and organizational conflicts that contribute to the tendency for the UN to become process, rather than results, oriented. To quote Jean-Marc Coicaud, “unless an organization is strong within, it cannot project strength outwards”. It is through negotiation, persuasion, and compromise that this strength can be achieved. These three elements apply to all aspects of the UN, including member states, governments, donors, UN employees, and potential partnerships with NGOs or private sector companies. Interpersonal relations, organizational structure, negotiation, persuasion, and compromise are all psychological phenomenon. Why, then, are there no psychologists employed at the UN for the purpose of investigating these issues? I believe I found my answer to this question in the discussion portion of a lecture presented on the role of emotional intelligence in development by Rahul Sur (OIOS United Nations, ATHGO International Symposium, 26/04/06). Rahul Sur advocated for the need to consider issues such as emotional and cultural opposition to policy implementation, as well as the role of these variables in the process of initial policy development. The general response to Mr. Sur’s proposal was an agreement to the importance of such issues, but strong doubt as to the feasibility of considering such subjective factors. As the majority of conference participants had backgrounds in disciplines based on quantifiable phenomenon, such as economics and political science, this response was not surprising. Psychology, however, is often based on qualitative

assessments of subjective phenomenon, such as attitudes and emotion. The fact that there is no obvious method to quantify a variable does not negate the necessity to consider that element. For instance, are men's attitudes and treatment towards women not essential considerations in developing means of empowering women in societies where they are repressed? We can develop hundreds of quantifiable tactics for repressed women to increase their rights within a society, but if we do not consider the man she goes home to face each night, we drastically reduce her chances of achieving these goals.

The current structure of the UN predominantly involves top-down processes, namely the imposition of policies on developing nations from the governing bodies of the agency. However, as it is the individuals and workers in these nations who are most aware of the effects of modifying societal practices, are these persons not a valuable source of input in optimizing the chances of successfully integrating change? Six of the eight Millennium Development Goals target the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. Representatives from UN-based organizations or NGOs should be involved in reporting directly to governing bodies on the status of a society and the resources most needed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. A focus on attitudes and culture is equally essential at a broader level, since many conflicts on an international sphere involve tensions rooted in ethnicity or religion. Current examples of such conflicts include Palestine-Israel and internal religious frictions in Iraq. The attitudinal basis of these conflicts exemplify why the consideration of psychology is necessary in their resolution. Without fully exploring the relational dynamics between the opponents and how their culture would react to the presence of foreign peace-keepers, any attempt to provide aid is merely a temporary bandaid on a wound in need of more than superficial attention. “[Conflicts] begin in

the minds of men, and it is in the minds of men that solutions must be found” (Rahul Sur, ATHGO International Symposium, 26/04/06).

Many complaints voiced at the symposium related to the overabundance of bureaucracy and lack of concrete action on the part of the UN. As psychology is greatly focused on the process of change at individual and societal levels, the inclusion of this discipline in decision making processes could provide a means of developing more specific targets with defined timelines. In the description of the Millennium Development Goals, the UN does not provide a recipe for how to attain the outcomes (United Nations, 2005). Specific plans and sub-targets must be developed for each goal, based on the particular needs and resources of each society. Member states should present these targets to UN governing bodies, with corresponding timelines, and be accountable for reporting on the achievement of these goals.

In conclusion, when addressing UN reform and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, it is vital to recall why the UN was initially created. The organization was established following World War II for the purpose of creating understanding, tolerance, and an environment in which future generations could peacefully coexist. If we examine the fulfillment of these aims now, 61 years later, we find that these noble ideas and the organization have been partially hijacked by policy makers and processes. The UN claims to be the house of the people of the world, yet I have not met one person outside of the field of international policy development who has even heard of the Millennium Development Goals. It is time to return this agency to the people by focusing attention on the psychological issues that underscored the initial establishment of the organization: understanding, tolerance, and relational dynamics between both individuals and nations.

References

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