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INTERNATIONAL LEGAL NOTE

Social workers and the United Nations
Effective advocacy strategies

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> Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen and
> ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he
> gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny?
> In other words, will it lead to self-reliance for the hungry and spiritually starving
> millions? (Mahatma Gandhi)

When the United Nations was founded more than 60 years ago, the world was dominated by particular countries and the principal threat was war. The world and the UN are more complex and indecipherable today. There are more countries in the UN, and they are not the only players. When discussing international social issues, we must now take into account numerous international laws and transglobal organizations. Whatever one's perspective on the effectiveness of the UN, international social work is set against a backdrop of international law. To understand international law is, at least to some extent, to understand the UN. Therefore, this inaugural International Legal Notes column addresses how social workers can influence and work with the UN.

As world economic surveys have made clear, there are statistics that show a dramatic increase in global wealth juxtaposed with a reality of increasing poverty and deprivation. How can social workers influence the debates and actions of the UN and thereby make a difference to the lives of the world's disadvantaged populations?

To understand the UN is to delve deeply into its values, philosophy, history, vision and goals. These in turn determine its organizational

culture, which has a formal and informal aspect. The environment of the UN has a unique style of leadership, communication and group dynamics. All of these elements combine to compose the framework for UN activities.[1]

The UN bureaucracy has been shaped by cultural and geopolitical traditions and by its own history. In addition to being highly centralized, the UN is also functionally specialized. In the formal structure of its administrative system, the UN has been strongly influenced by those found in modern organizations.

Social workers have been playing an active role at the UN since its birth in 1945. As social scientists we like be able to predict and explain how and why an organization functions as it does. To undertake this regarding the UN is a monumental task, and one beyond the scope of this article.

Clarifying our goals

What we can attempt to do is to ask ourselves what explicit sequence of steps should be taken by social workers to actively engage the UN. To successfully influence an organization change is not easy or simple. There are as many variables to consider as there are people in an organization. Whether or not your organization has already had some interaction with the UN, it needs to answer some seemingly simple questions.

1. What specifically do we want to accomplish?
2. What are we doing that we should continue to do?
3. In what ways can we improve what we are currently doing?
4. What are we not doing that we should begin doing?
5. What are we doing that we should not be doing?
6. What do we expect from international social work organizations?
7. What can international social work organizations rightfully expect from us?

How do social workers work with the UN?

In 2004, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) approved this definition of social work: 'The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and

the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work' (IASSW and IFSW, 2004). Whatever one's conceptual definition of human rights (IFSW, 1994), globalization (IFSW, 2006), or international social work (Cox and Pawar, 2006; Greif, 2004; Healy, 2001; Hokenstad and Midgley, 1997; Lyons et al., 2006), when working with the UN, it will involve avoiding stereotypes, appreciating differences and being mindful that the values that one is accustomed to believing are universal are rarely so.

In terms of content, social workers are involved in a variety of efforts. In Liberia, a child soldier is reunited with his family. Villagers in Angola learn about the dangers of anti-personnel mines. Young girls in Cambodia and Thailand, at high risk of being recruited as prostitutes, are encouraged to finish school. Street children in Brazil are protected from being killed. Some of the UN's standing programs for possible involvement are listed here.

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UNHSP-UN-Habitat)
United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW)
United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI)
United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)
United Nations Volunteers (UNV)
World Food Programme (WFP)

Approaching UN employees

As we strive for the growth of a more civilized world society, we first need to recall our own civility. Before approaching an employee in the UN, we need to be sensitive to:

- fully understanding the employee's cultural norms of behavior;
- making the employee feel effective and competent;
- appreciating each person's skills;
- acknowledging each employee's status;
- not disrupting important established relationships;
- not inadvertently diverting or reducing the normal flow of information to the employee;
- not reducing the power and influence of the employee;
- being respectful of the employee's personal privacy and boundaries.

Effective advocacy

Some guidelines can be suggested for effectively advocating at the UN.

1. *Have the right frame of mind.* There are effective and ineffective bureaucracies and there are effective and ineffective employees. Assume that the UN is effective and its employees are responsive.
2. *Find the right employee*. This is the key to success. Obtain a telephone and email directory, and a table of organization of the UN. Consult others in identifying which person can really help you. More often than not it will not be the person at the very top of the agency, but someone further down.
3. *Be persistent*. Once you have found someone who is genuinely concerned about your issue, you have made an important ally.
4. *Keep communication open and cultivate relationships.* Bureaucrats are people. They like attention and respond to friendly faces. Identify communication choke points. If your issue is a global one and participants are geographically dispersed, do not over-rely on email. To the extent possible, keep in phone contact.
5. *Always be polite*. The person you are abrupt with today will inevitably cross your path again. It is not like dealing with an overseas telephone operator; you cannot just hang up and

know you will get a different one. Once your credibility has
gone, you may have to spend valuable time trying to regain it.

6. *Personal contact is best*. There are UN personnel in many coun-
   tries, so it may be possible to ask to visit. Try to talk in congenial
   surroundings. While still being true to yourself, adapt and
   modify your personal style as you become aware of the effect
   you are having on others.

7. *Detour around obstacles*. Consult your UN directory and table
   of organization to try to approach employees who show concern
   about your issue.

8. *Keep in contact with your country representatives*. Your country
   representative wants to accommodate every constituent. The
   constituent with a problem is a potential ally.

9. *Send follow-up communication*. This prevents misunderstandings
   and lets the employee know that you are serious about the issue
   and intend to pursue it. Offer a synopsis and analysis that objec-
   tively looks at the consequences of your discussion in a way that
   accurately identifies the strengths and weaknesses of all of the
   options under consideration.

10. *Keep focused on tangible results not just activities*. Planning,
    updating and discussing are important, but they are not our
    ultimate accomplishments. Make sure you have clearly defined
    project goals and objectives, specifying tasks to be achieved,
    identifying what resources are needed and creating budgets,
    timelines and standards for evaluation.

11. *Be nimble*. No agreement or plan can stand up against reality.
    As social workers, we would do well to take a page out of the
    business person's book. We need to make sure our deliverables
    are on time, within budget and meeting the quality expectations
    of our stakeholders. Ultimately, the key issue may not be how
    well we stick to our values, but how well we are able to navigate
    through a constantly changing terrain and still accomplish our
    goals.

Working through international professional associations

Three prominent international professional associations which work
directly with the UN are: the IFSW,[2] the International Council on
Social Welfare[3] and the IASSW.[4] There is also a very large number
of non-governmental organizations which would welcome your
participation.

Conclusion

We like to meet our challenges unencumbered by bureaucracy. On a global scale this is impossible. As social workers who feel we are citizens of the world and not just citizens of a single country, we hope that our efforts and contributions will be used as they were originally intended. In reality, things do not always work out quite that way. But goodwill, sincere effort and respect can go a long way towards transforming seemingly intractable problems and allow us to look to a global future with optimism.

In 2000, world leaders agreed to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), an agenda to promote sustainable human development in all countries. As many readers will know, MDGs are specific targets for poverty reduction, health, education, gender equality, environmental sustainability and global partnerships to be reached by 2015. History has demonstrated examples of successes by social workers of such large international efforts. These should spur us to continue to seek ways to influence the UN and the world society it serves.

Notes

1. See http://www.un.org/aboutun/mainbodies.htm for more about the structure and functions of the UN.
2. http://www.ifsw.org/home
3. http://icsw.org/index.htm
4. http://www.iassw-aiets.org/

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