

Psychology and the United Nations: From Process to People

Jennifer Czincz, B.A. (Hons.)

Doctoral Candidate in Clinical Psychology, University of Ottawa

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My name is Jennifer Czincz and I am a Ph.D. student in Clinical Psychology at the University of Ottawa. I recently attended a conference concerning youth involvement in UN reform and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals at the UN.

Surprisingly, I was the sole representative from psychology at a conference of over 400 youth from 89 countries. Psychology is not a visible player in the international scene, but could potentially offer novel approaches to addressing all three of the recurring themes that I encountered at the convention:

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

Interpersonal and organizational conflicts within the UN contribute to the tendency for the agency to become process, rather than results, oriented. 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. However, no psychologists are employed at the UN for the purpose of investigating such issues.

The sole reference I encountered related to the need for a greater inclusion of psychology in UN processes at the conference was a lecture presented on the role of emotional intelligence in development. The general response was an agreement to the importance of such issues, but strong doubt as to the feasibility of considering such subjective factors. 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?

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? 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. 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. The attitudinal basis of these conflicts exemplify why the consideration of psychology is necessary in their resolution.

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.