

VISIONARY CONVERSATION
KISHORE MANDHYAN – Deputy Director, Political, Peacekeeping and Humanitarian
Affairs, Executive Office of the United Nations Secretary- General
8 December 2009



Mr. Mandhyan outlined his vision for an international system fully reflective of its core values, having the following features:

1. A balance between norms and interests, that is between ideal standards and individual or national interests
2. A balance between the interests of the weak and of the strong, among nations or persons
3. Respect for life and for non-bio-centric life, drawing inspiration and sustenance from inanimate aspects of nature such as rocks and waves as well
4. Respect for diversity and for values, noting that culture has to be an expression of values and not simply a mechanical approach to culture through habits and tradition
5. Respect for future generations and the right to dignity

The speaker lamented aspects of UN system culture that ran counter to these approaches, including the “obsession” with titles, and the tendency for even senior staff to seek leadership from their seniors rather than accept responsibility. He suggested that this could be improved by common sense gestures and simple acts of decency such as mentoring junior staff or making oneself readily accessible to others.



With respect to trends that support or challenge the emergence of his vision, Mr. Mandhyan noted that the mindset of consumption was an obstacle to progress. In the UN experience this may be evident in the choices staff members make to live more ostentatiously rather than in the manner of the local people, even when their consumption fuels the same powerful interests the UN seeks to counteract. Conversely, communications, technology, music and travel were all increasingly supportive of the expansive approach required, although caution needed to be exercised in their application. He observed that the new generation of UN staff was more sensitive, and less concerned with diplomacy and hierarchy. He proposed that a centre be established to foster the new culture of human dignity, which would bring together the work of UNU, UNITAR, the Staff College, and the University for Peace.

In terms of options for the way forward, Mr. Mandhyan stressed that change does not begin with the Secretary-General or an institutional mechanism but with oneself. Such change may come through a cataclysmic experience such as the death of a loved one, through being touched by some element of beauty, or through reflection on one's own behavior. He also suggested that titles, the ornamentations of power and technological trappings should be minimized, while promoting active listening and a less militaristic approach to questions of peace and dignity. Dignity could be one's technology, and the use of language could reflect this. Education should be better attuned to integrity, which would be expressed at work through respect for colleagues and common sense accommodation of their needs, e.g. breastfeeding breaks for new mothers. In his experience, "less can become more", in giving up formal powers one can gain greater power.

With regard to options or actions that one can commit to take in furtherance of the vision, he proposed unlearning a lot of what has been learnt, in particular simplifying language by reducing the use of adverbs and adjectives; removing dependencies by becoming more self-reliant and entrepreneurial; and development of the self, especially the soul and heart, and with effective exercise of the mind to conquer negative states such as anger, hatred, envy and fear. Also important was recognizing where one stood in relation to the vision and mapping one's journey.

The follow-up discussion covered the following:



With respect to a vision for the international system, the absence of egos and a more expansive sense of identity that went beyond a “silo” mentality were significant elements. It was felt that the UN was a microcosm of the world, which made it more imperative to “do it right”. Participants pointed to the value of building a community beyond the individual, and being part of communities such as GVI that support the individual in the face of the sometimes disheartening or frustrating UN culture.

Regarding the reality to be addressed, a participant noted that when one made the choice to live simply, one may have to deal with an inordinate degree of bureaucracy since simple living is often perceived as a sign of powerlessness. It was also important to focus on how one can approach colleagues or be of assistance on a human level rather than in bureaucratic terms. The quickest way to create change may be through leaders but leaders may not be seeking change.

In terms of options for the way forward, it was suggested that it could be helpful to challenge people to think of how or when they feel like they are losing their power, and explore ways in which their power can be regained. Resilience was a significant factor, and meditation could play a role in remaining grounded and centered. Emphasis on openness rather than competition was also key to developing a new culture. One participant also thought it helpful to open up the UN more to contributions from non-UN persons who are inspired to work with the ideal the organization represented, perhaps sharing data-sets and other materials for wider application. In this vein, it was also critical for the UN to make better use of the enormous talent that the organization convened in its staff and activities, which would best serve realization of the vision.