

BRUNCH
“Is the UN about politics?”
November 2003

The following is a summary of the Wisdom at Work discussions:

The first speaker, from the diplomatic community, stressed that politics was the reason for the existence of the UN. She said that the main issue was whether UN staff were willing to change, since it was evident that malaise and other ills in the organisation were the result of individual self-interest, as may also be the case in the diplomatic community. As such she noted that the main question was one of identity, and advocated that people look beyond their individual identities to the supernatural energy common to all of us, and value the human being. The speaker noted that policies and approaches were in constant evolution and that the UN secretariat was in the powerful position of being able to interpret the decisions of Member States; it was up to the staff to take that power and put the right emphases in their mandates - "power is taken, not given"

The second speaker, from the UN, noted that the UN reflects the will of its Member States, and traced the history of the increasing disconnect of the organisation from its values base, as well as her own experience in this regard. An important element in being an effective and consistent advocate for change however is having a minimum of contractual stability and the recognition of all the rights of a staff member. She indicated that it would be unrealistic for UN staff to be apolitical, but that they could be nonetheless pragmatic in trying to bring about reform. Among the key tools in this respect would be pressing for staff representation to be more actively engaged with substantive and reform issues; and lobbying particular Member States who have been supportive of the independence of the UN secretariat.

Follow-up exchanges:

- Attention was drawn to the apparent message of duplicity from the UN between its espoused commitment to values (such as the staff integrity to be developed by stable careers in the organisation) and its practice (which included possible disregard for labour rights), and the implications for UN credibility and image
- It was noted that although politics may have been instrumental in the establishment of the UN, it has also become institutionalised in the organisation and had serious implications for the effective discharge of the mandate, as evidenced by the events surrounding Iraq, as well as on the individual level. With respect to democratisation of the Security Council and reform of the UN mandate, it was felt by some that these were necessary efforts, while others expressed the view that such a proposal may be self-defeating due to the lack of Member-State support, and what needed to be done primarily was to target the disconnect between the organisation's mandate and its practice, with stronger advocacy efforts by UN staff.
- Other issues such as apathy, self-interest and bureaucracy indicated that reform was needed also with respect to management concerns. It was suggested that any effective reform may need to come from within the organisation, using an approach

and facilitating a culture which was not top-down, but fully participatory and cognisant of the freedom of association.

- Accountability was singled out as a key concern, with a comparison made to the private sector, whereby the "Board of Directors" in the Security Council were not accountable to the "shareholders" as taxholders, and "branding" was mismanaged
- Also identified as important was the need to develop scholarship around the issues raised, based on surveys and other data which could further substantiate advocacy efforts. This could be enhanced by networking to expand the debate among other actors.
- It was also felt that support for advocacy could also take the form of recognising and rewarding best practices through events such as award dinners.