

RETREAT
"The UN at 60 - retirement or revitalization?"
April 2005



We had a happy, friendly and meaningful retreat, in the green and sun-filled mountains of Bogève, France. The twenty-four participants, drawn from the UN, NGOs, academia, government representatives and the private sector, collectively contributed to a sense of sharing, purpose and fun which we look forward to sustaining in building up our Wisdom at Work community.



Participants engaged in a programme of activities including:

- Brunch discussion (summary of Sunday discussion below)
- Group coaching (values, challenges and future stories)
- Walks in the mountain and nearby countryside
- Yoga
- Meditation



On Saturday night we enjoyed each other's renditions of poetry, readings, jokes and music – from Beijing opera to indigenous New Zealand chanting, topped off with improvised tango and American country songs over the bonfire.



On Sunday participants convened smaller groups to discuss issues important to them, including “attaining wisdom”, “getting in touch with my spiritual self”, “when to walk away” and “how to deal with an unethical request at work”.



The brunch on Sunday was on the theme – “UN at 60: retirement or revitalisation?”

Invited speaker John Burley, recently retired from a high-level 30-plus year career in the UN, noted the UN’s achievements since its establishment, including decolonization and the minimization of nuclear threats, and stressed that to him retirement of the UN was not an option. He said that the UN was periodically in a state of crisis, as demonstrated by the crisis over Vietnam, but posited that it was currently in its most serious crisis, involving attempts by the United States to undermine the organisation, following the Secretary-General’s denunciation of the Iraq war as illegal, albeit belatedly. With respect to the reform process, leadership among the membership was a key element; it was also important to include other actors such as NGOs; as well, it was fundamental to move beyond the current economic model, which excluded moral issues and was antithetical to multilateralism, to forge new relationships based on fairness, equality and protecting the weak

In terms of action, Mr. Burley advocated support to the UN Secretary-General’s reform proposal rather than a compromised agreement. He advised that staff should either maintain optimism and act with integrity, or leave. While the management culture involved too much laissez-faire and political interference, he emphasized that it was possible to be an independent international civil servant and to make a difference as an individual in your respective field of operation primarily by being positive, persistent, and serving as an example through being true to your values. In closing the speaker made two proposals which he suggested would take the UN further in achieving its goals in the future:

1. to change the headquarters of the UN from New York to Hong Kong, which would reflect the changing economic realities
2. to change the source of financing for the UN from governmental to independent funding, including taxes from financial transactions

During the discussions, participants raised the following concerns:

- that the main concern with the proposals was political feasibility rather than technical feasibility, and pre-supposed a different relationship among political powers
 - that in removing the source of funding from governments, it would be difficult to establish accountability, and it would be important to ensure staff integrity through rigorous systems of appraisal
 - that in moving to Hong Kong, another expensive city, the UN would be continuing to attract staff who are more concerned about high salaries and prestige rather than service, so somewhere like India may help to overcome this
 - NGOs should focus efforts on Africa to overcome the political neglect of this region
 - there was a need to build a common awareness about what is expected of international civil servants
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Some of the comments made by participants about what they took away:

“A network of likeminded people – an ongoing forum within which to discuss issues”

“Friends and a little bit of wisdom”

“New contacts, insights, more motivation for my work”

“Fun, friendships and plenty of wisdom!”

