

BRUNCH
“UN reform”
April 2006

The following summarizes the Wisdom at Work discussions:

Participants, asked to give words describing what we think of the UN, included the following: slow, hamstrung, captured, the only way, aspiring (to something higher), positive, ineffectual, source of hope, corrupt, fraudulent, all-but-hopeless, esteemed, needed, asleep, ethically based, needing inner ethical improvement, has potential, huge machine that's not very efficient, money waster, discrepancy between aspirations and what it lives, hopeful. Throughout the discussion many people expressed hope in the UN's potential and frustration in its failures, while differing in their sense of how deeply it is failing and in their personal responses to it.

There was common agreement that the UN is worth preserving but that obstacles to its success are present. The difference of opinion was in the nature of those obstacles and in how serious and far-reaching they are. We agreed that we cannot generalize because different UN agencies work in different ways and have different degrees of success. While recognizing the specificity of each agency, it is also possible and necessary to look at problems that are widely shared across the UN system.

A key difference in perspective that emerged in the discussion is between people who believe that the problems within the UN reflect the problems of all organizations and people, and those who believe that the deepest problems in the UN are specific to the UN. It was also suggested that there is a weak and loose system of accountability and that the governments to which the UN is primarily accountable often do not focus the organization back to its mandate.

The response to the first view is to focus or re-focus people on values. Participants said that this is a continuing need for people and especially for people working in an organization founded to preserve the dignity of every human being and to support just peace in the world. At the same time, given the fact that people who work at the UN, as people everywhere, are differently motivated, some suggested that it is important to look at the systems within the UN. Taking into account the specific and unique set-up and role of the UN, we may be able to begin to make tangible improvements by analyzing the hiring policies, the professional development and training, the behaviors that are rewarded and discouraged, the accountability structures and thinking about how to align them concretely with the UN's founding values.