

**BRUNCH**  
**“The world says the UN is dead: What do you think?”**  
**April 2003**

The following presents the highlights of the Wisdom at Work (WaW) discussions, based on the theme “The world says the UN is dead: What do you think?” :

1. The WaW representative launched the discussion with the 26 March 2003 letter of the Secretary-General to all staff of the UN, and suggested that the UN was at a crossroads. Participants generally expressed the view that the UN had not taken a strong stand on the war in Iraq. The SG’s assertion that the UN remained relevant did not carry much meaning and implications for staff were unclear. Internal responses to UN demonstrations had also been negative, and seemed subject to inconsistent interpretation of the staff rules.
2. The first guest speaker rephrased the theme to ask whether the UN had ever been alive, or had indeed been stillborn. He proposed that the UN was fundamentally hampered by the following:
  - The recruitment process was ineffective as committed young professionals did not find the security needed to make a sustained contribution
  - Programmes were not funded well enough to make a significant impact
  - Sustainable development underpinned the UN mandate but efforts were piecemeal and with weak impact
  - The system was not responsive to popular sentiment, and not involved in significant initiatives outside the system

As such, he offered 3 models of UN engagement, suggesting that each served a distinct purpose, which was most effective when de-linked to a degree from the others:

- The traditional diplomatic model useful for conflict issues, but not on social issues
- The expert model on which social programmes should be based
- The advocacy model through which the UN should take a truly non-partisan and outspoken stance.

The speaker also expressed the view that what created corruption of the UN spirit was that governments did not care much about the work of the UN and were satisfied simply to know vaguely that some projects were being undertaken; there was therefore no accountability and international civil servants were not pressured to perform.

3. The second guest speaker stressed that there had been significant changes in the last 50 years, notably in communication and the participation of civil society. He drew positive reference to the tri-partite model of the ILO and asserted that a new system needed to be built around 3 main axes:
  - Enterprises
  - Strong governments
  - Civil society

Each type of entity would be represented and have the right to vote

It was also key that leadership be trusted to a Director-General and not a Secretary-General, so that proposals are made from the UN and not from governments alone. He suggested that what was needed was not piecemeal efforts but radical change to incorporate new actors. In this respect it was an important SG report was due next year on civil society UN participation.

4. In terms of action that could be undertaken, participants agreed that we should develop a strategy around a response to the SG's letter, having the following criteria:
  - Clear message as articulated in a letter (more below)
  - Supported by a critical mass of UN staff of at least 50, preferably young professionals
  - Support from high level in the UN, if possible SG himself
  - Support from Government Ministers

While we would wish to be comprehensive and initiate change, we acknowledge that it could take some 2-5 years to effect any changes in the system, including more fundamental ideas such as revised a UN Charter and a World Parliament, and this should inform what suggestions we include in our first public communication.