

United Nations Update: Human Security and Dignity

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The United Nations Department of Public Information/ Non-governmental organization (DPI/NGO) Annual Conference, "Human Security and Dignity: Fulfilling the Promise of the United Nations," was held at the United Nations in New York on September 8-10, 2003. Over 2,000, NGO representatives that work with the United Nations attended the meetings but for those who were unable to come to New York, it was made available via a video web cast to a broader public through United Nations (<http://www.un.org>) for the first time.

The Conference theme of security, is tied more to relations between states than among people. However, true human security – as recently defined by the report of the Commission on Human Security – flows from the aspirations of people seeking a sense of well-being and dignity in their daily lives and for the future. This requires meeting basic human needs and ensuring vital freedoms.

The Conference featured presentations by such notables as: Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former President of Brazil, who now chairs a high-level panel to strengthen United Nations partnerships with civil society; Danny Glover, the actor and a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Goodwill Ambassador; Jeffrey Sachs, world-renowned economist on development issues and a Special Advisor to the United Nations Secretary-General; as well as Sadako Ogata, former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Co-Chair of the United Nations Commission on Human Security.

Historically, a cycle of major United Nations conferences set an ambitious agenda for human development for the new century, culminating in the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals by 149 Heads of State and Government in 2000. These Goals heralded a unique confluence of international political policies and resources that promised to seriously tackle entrenched global problems, particularly extreme poverty (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/index.html>). It is alarming to learn that more than one billion people, nearly 20 per cent of the global population, live in absolute poverty. For them, the struggle for survival is a daily battle. For many others, the degradation of human security is often a slow, silent process, and may capture the attention of the international community only when a humanitarian crisis erupts. Such crises have deep transnational consequences.

In the plenary sessions, Conference participants discussed basic needs as well as the psychological synergies required to achieve healthy societies and personal well-being. They explored the transformational power of education. They examined concerted campaigns to empower diverse groups of people who have organized to overcome oppression. They proposed sustainable solutions to our troubled relationship with the environment. A diverse and dynamic group of NGO representatives, United Nations and Government officials, and others examined recent advances, best practices, effective partnerships, challenges and possible roles the international community and civil society can play in this vital process.

Through an interactive internet connection the sessions permitted both NGOs on site and NGOs worldwide to participate. Sessions included: 1) Psychological Aspects of Human Security and Dignity, 2)

Educating for a Secure Future, 3) From Oppression to Empowerment, 4) Sustainable Development in the Context of Globalization, and 5) A Conversation with Eminent Persons on Global Trends and Strategies.

1) Psychological Aspects of Human Security and Dignity

Societies have developed a variety of norms, processes and institutions to improve the security and dignity of their citizens. To achieve real social security, however, it is increasingly recognized that people must be empowered to develop their potential and become full participants in society. By enabling people to fulfill their creative and spiritual needs, societies grow more stable and prosperous. A breakdown of these systems can cause enormous insecurity, fear, and loss of dignity. The psychological impact of a society's failure to assure human rights, adequate economic and social security and opportunities can be devastating for both communities and individuals.

This panel addressed the complex psychological aspects of human security and dignity, focusing on mental health, spirituality, prejudice and tolerance. It examined people's perceptions of security and dignity as well as ways in which people recover from trauma and the disruption of their lives that result from violence and chaos.

2) Educating for a Secure Future

As Secretary-General Kofi Annan has pointed out, the key to the new global economy is education, from primary school through life-long learning. It is central to development, social progress and human freedom, and is the foundation for human dignity. Knowledge advances economic, personal and social security, and offers the greatest hope for lasting peace. Effective educational processes provide both opportunities and responsibilities for the world's citizenry, particularly children and youth.

This panel examined how educators are addressing these challenges. It looked at the impact of education on socio-economic development and democratic reform. Mostly it raised issues on innovative human rights and peace education programs and ways that children in all parts of the world could receive a minimum of a primary school education by 2015. They considered strategies needed to meet the Millennium Development Goals that call for narrowing the gender gap in primary and secondary education by the year 2005.

3) From Oppression to Empowerment

Oppression can take the form of unjust hardship and tyranny. It may restrict people's identity. In the extreme, tyranny has power over life itself. In the face of oppression, the universal need of the human spirit to be recognized and valued often moves people to fight for their human rights and dignity. Many groups have struggled from oppression to a place of empowerment. Others have created supportive environments in which they thrive despite oppression. The United Nations plays an important role in empowerment, whether by assisting in the election of a democratic government or by taking the struggle for gender equality to a new level.

This panel looked at the extraordinary efforts of those who have succeeded in their quest for empowerment. It examined the key motivators and kinds of leadership that inspired these groups to challenge the status quo.

4) Sustainable Development in the Context of Globalization

Our action in the face of environmental degradation and unsustainable consumption of the Earth's resources deeply affects the health of the planet and the well-being of its inhabitants. The ways we harvest the Earth's bounty and arrange for the equitable distribution of its resources are among today's most pressing concerns. United Nations member States have pledged to dramatically reduce, and ultimately eliminate, extreme poverty and hunger while ensuring environmental sustainability. As we move toward

these goals, we must carefully adopt strategies and policies that recognize the fundamental rights of all the world's citizens to food security, fresh water, gainful employment and healthy, sustainable habitats.

This panel explored globalization and the increasing reliance on the private sector to meet the complex and conflicting needs of the world's people including: the impact that privatization of natural resources have on rural communities, and ways that energy policies can foster economic and environmental well-being. Most importantly the panel examined ways that civil society and global public opinion could be instrumental in persuading Governments and the business community to adopt policies and practices that enhance lives.

5) Conversation with Eminent Persons on Global Trends and Strategies

Trends that define the evolution of our societies today are increasingly global. The ageing of populations worldwide as well as the explosive growth of cities and the neglect of rural communities are taking place at an accelerated pace. As we witness the emergence of the so-called information society, the gap between developed and developing societies is widening, thwarting the advance of press freedoms and cultural and informational exchange. HIV/AIDS and other pandemics profoundly affecting the development and security of entire nations continue to claim the lives of millions of people every year. Burgeoning civil society movements and the emergence of global public opinion are powerful new forces in the world that require greater scrutiny.

Speakers in this session discussed the significance of The Global Fund, created in 2002, whose purpose is to dramatically increase resources to fight three of the world's most devastating diseases, and to direct those resources to areas of greatest needs.

This year's 56th Conference, presented a forum for civil society and the United Nations that jointly reasserted their determination to assure that living in security remains an achievable goal and that living in dignity is not a fleeting illusion, but a reality achieved through common commitment and international solidarity among all people.

The Conference web site is archived for future reference and will enable NGOs and the general public to access audio and video web casts through their personal computers. It is available to the NGO network through the United Nations DPI/NGO Section web page, <http://www.un.org/dpi/ngosection> or NGO/DPI Executive Committee's web page, <http://www.ngodpiexecom.org/conference/>.

References

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