



QUNO

Quaker United Nations Office

“Every Country My Country, and Every Man My Brother”¹: Values and Transformation in International Policy Settings.

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Introduction

President Levao, Dean Grimes, Professor Puccio: thank you. It’s always a pleasure to be back in New Jersey.

Today I have been invited to talk about values and transformation in international policy settings, but before I dive in, I’d like to set the scene a little, to give you a sense of the context that I work in – and I’ll start by telling a couple of stories.

When I first came to work at the Quaker United Nations Office almost ten years ago, my new colleagues hosted a reception for me as the incoming Director. As is customary at these things, I was expected to give a little speech, and as a newcomer, I wanted to make sure that I didn't embarrass my colleagues by saying anything more than usually uninformed or inappropriate. What I settled on in the end was to start off by reading from the preamble to the Charter of the United Nations, which was of course signed in San Francisco in 1945, because I wanted to root my remarks in those principles on which the UN still stands. This is what I read out:

“We The Peoples of the United Nations, Determined

- to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and*
- to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and*
- to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and*
- to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,*

...have agreed to the present Charter of the United Nations”

¹ The quotation is from 1818, in the writings of a Quaker called Daniel Wheeler, who among other things went to St. Petersburg as an adviser to Tsar Alexander I.

Now, what struck me most at the time, is that when I looked around the room, at a group of diplomats and UN officials, that some of those present had their eyes closed. Not I think because they were napping – it was too early in my remarks for that – but because, as I was later to appreciate, the Charter for some of them is almost a religious document, a sacred text in a largely secular setting. And it was a useful lesson for me that I've never forgotten, that in the midst of the complexity, the politics and bureaucracy of the UN, that the people in that room, from all over the world, of many different religions or none, could draw a sense of purpose and a sense of community from the words of the UN Charter.

The second story came about some months later, when I was meeting with an Ambassador from a Middle Eastern member state in his office at the end of a busy day. I was there to discuss a possible meeting for the President of his country with a group of civil society organizations during an upcoming visit, and for ten minutes or so we talked about policy and logistical issues. But then somehow or other the conversation took a different course, and I found myself in a heartfelt conversation about the direct relationship between individuals and God, both in Christian and Muslim theology, but also as a matter of direct personal experience. And then after twenty minutes or so, we went back to our previous discussion. And coming out of that meeting I marveled that for this particular individual, the world of government, of business, and the world of spirituality, of values and belief, were seamlessly connected, not separated, that the basic existential framing of the separation of church and state that I had grown up with was not present for him in the same way.

So coming to the UN, I had clearly found myself in an environment where values were important, although in ways that were quite complicated, and it's hard to express what a complete contrast that was for me. For the previous 20 years I had been a banker, employed by big financial organizations in London and New York, working weekends and long hours in an environment which was occasionally values-challenged, and where efforts were largely individually focused, with little sense of acting for a greater objective. As a practicing Quaker, I had for a while been looking for a work environment where I could better connect with the things that were important to me, where values had a role, and apparently I had found it.

Background

Before going any further, I should say a few words about the UN itself, and what Quakers are doing there.

The United Nations is the principal and most representative forum where the world's governments come together to engage with one another on global issues and concerns. There are many other international groupings and organizations, but the UN is where all 193 countries have a voice, and where agreements are worked out on issues such as climate change and development – so, for example, last Friday saw lockdown security in Turtle Bay for the signing of the Paris Climate Change Agreement, in a week that also saw a General Assembly Special Session on drugs and a high level thematic discussion on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, and in a month where the Security Council, under the Chinese Presidency, has been considering actions on Syria, Burundi, terrorism, South Sudan and the future of UN peacebuilding..

The UN acts where there is agreement in the international community: where such agreement does not exist, then the UN doesn't act. It's as if you took all of the branches of the US government and stripped away almost everything except the senate – no House of Representatives, no meaningful judiciary (and no constitution), no standing army or police force and an almost powerless executive

branch. The remarkable and rather wonderful thing about the UN is that anything gets done at all, that not every decision is driven purely by national interest in a realpolitik way, but that there is space for actions that benefit everyone, for altruism and humanity – that is, for values.

There are three communities at the UN: diplomats, representing their governments; UN officials, who are international civil servants; and civil society, particularly in the form of non-governmental organizations, or NGOs. All of the major humanitarian and development organizations are represented, like Oxfam and Care and MSF, human rights organizations like Amnesty International, and also faith-based organizations, like the Quakers. The NGOs spend their time trying to influence the policy decisions being made by the diplomats, and implemented by the UN officials.

The Quakers have been at the UN since 1947, when it had only just been decided that the UN would be based in New York, and before the iconic buildings went up, when diplomats and officials were just arriving and starting to grapple with the challenge of how to implement the grand vision laid out in the UN Charter. Which is to say that we have been at the UN for longer than most member states (the original list was 51 countries). For a small group committed to changing the world, to making it a more peaceful, just and inclusive place, the UN offers unique advantages.

For the Quakers, with a focus on peace and justice, the UN is the forum where the international community comes together in responding to violent conflict and large scale violations of human rights, and in agreeing priorities for post-conflict reconstruction, humanitarian relief and development and sustainability. It is also the place where global norms, standards and practices on peace and justice issues are debated and set, which then impact the behavior of governments and other actors thereafter. And the UN plays a significant direct and coordinating role in many of the regions and countries that are impacted by poverty and violence.

On a day to day basis, the work of our small office in New York, along with our colleagues in Geneva and in partnership with the American Friends Service Committee, our sister organization, is to engage and influence UN policy makers. As our 2016 Program Review states, “We strive towards international standards and practices that enable and empower peaceful, social, political and economic relationships”: and for us, working with the UN provides tremendous leverage in doing just that.

Values and Policy Change

So that’s the background to my remarks today, and now I’d like to go a little deeper. I plan to focus on three observations that come from the experience that I and my colleagues and predecessors have had in working in this unique environment for almost seventy years:

- First, values are a legitimate and effective entry point for policy work.
- Second, that progress is often made through engaging with the inconsistencies in the values that people hold
- Third, that fostering values-based change requires us to design a range of different strategies

I should also say at this point that I’m not an academic, nor an expert in ethics or perhaps anything else. These observations and my reflections are simply drawn from direct experience of working as a values-based organization at an international policy level at the UN.

So let’s look at each of the three items in turn.

Values as an entry point

The first observation, that values are a legitimate and effective entry point, stems from an analysis that suggests that values shape policy-makers' inspiration, motivation, strategies and methodologies (that is, the reasons for doing what they do and how they do it), particularly in situations where they have flexibility to act independently of national positions. Indeed, in practice, in international negotiations, it can be suggested that international standards and actions emerge at the intersection of values and national interest.

And when I say 'international standards and actions' – that might be human rights norms, or standards on criminal justice, or development policy, and actions can include security council actions or more broadly UN activities in developing and conflict affected countries

A good example of this would be the negotiations around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the 1940s. There were strong national interests at stake, often expressed as competing ideologies, with the US and others in the West pushing for civil and political rights, and Russia and China and others emphasizing economic and social rights. But in the midst of that there were also genuine attempts (not least by Eleanor Roosevelt) to articulate a broadly acceptable set of standards that would protect the weak and stand the test of time.

We see national interest most vividly on display these days in matters of peace and security, where the use of the security council veto means that, in practice, there are countries which cannot be discussed (particularly those most connected with Russia, China and the US) and situations where progress cannot be made (such as Syria). But national interest is also important in a wide variety of multilateral negotiations. Where a diplomat has strong instructions from capital, they may have little or no flexibility, but in other cases and on less controversial subjects they may have considerable leeway. It is also the case that national negotiating positions themselves may have flexibility built in, and can change over time.

But what about facts? Here I am, talking to an academic audience – isn't the heart of impacting policy decisions all about analysis and finely tuned argument? Surely, a keenly structured, finely reasoned and well-footnoted paper can change the world? Well, much as I love analytic work – I nearly became an academic - I would suggest that, in the policy world, the answer is 'not necessarily'. Indeed, it is often the case that facts and analysis impact policy decisions only to the extent that they change the values of policy makers and those who influence them. Just look at climate change. Anthropocentric climate change is established science, but there are plenty of leading US politicians who deny it for ideological reasons. Eventually facts and analysis can influence belief and values, and in the long term they can be important drivers of policy change, but the gap can be profound and long-lasting between analysis and action.

This by the way, is also why doing good research is not enough. I can write a fabulous paper on how to bring peace to the world, but unless I have a strategy to follow through, not only to disseminate the information but to engage my target audiences in a way that connects with their values, with what they believe, then I may be disappointed about how little impact I have – facts and analysis can be helpful, but they are insufficient in themselves.

In an international policy context, the values that a diplomat brings to the table can have a variety of roots. The precedent of existing international standards and agreements is important (and an appeal to relevant precedent is always a powerful argument in multilateral negotiations). Political ideologies and religious belief also contribute to the mix, as does personal experience. Indeed, values derived from personal experience can be particularly strong, which is why it's important to link theoretical policy discussions to negotiators' own experience where possible, and to expose policy makers to the lived realities of people affected by the decisions they are making.

Inconsistency of Value Systems and Dilemmas

The second observation, that "Progress is often made through engaging with the inconsistencies in the values that people hold", enshrines a number of ideas.

First, it is rarely the case that the sets of values held by an individual or a group are entirely consistent – indeed, inconsistency seems to be the norm. And frequently we APPLY values inconsistently as well. Human beings seem to crave absolutism, whether for themselves or for others. How often do we turn on the TV and hear people sounding off what those "Muslims" believe, or men talking about "how women think". But the reality is that not only are individual and group value-sets far less homogenous than they are often portrayed, but human beings happily hold values that are inconsistent or even in conflict with one another. We can exemplify this in a very simplistic way with maxims – thus, we can commend our own caution by recalling "Look before you leap", at least until we remember that "He who hesitates is lost." – and in application we may take comfort from inconsistency by remembering that "One man's meat is another man's poison." until someone reminds us that "What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander." But this inconsistency applies at a group level and a national level as well. Here in the US, the framers of the Declaration of Independence made much of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" as inalienable rights, but we have yet to see these rights applied consistently to all persons irrespective of gender, color and wealth. And that example also points towards one of the key working strategies of values-based policy work: identifying areas where core values, particularly humanitarian ones, are inequitably and inconsistently applied.

Second, at the level of working methods, these inconsistencies offer points of entry for discussion, and the potential for finding areas of common experience or concern. Even for groups whose formal expressions of belief – be they manifestos or creeds or vision statements – appear entirely different, it is usually the case that in practice there are some values, particularly fundamental ones, that overlap. This also implies that no presumptions can be made that an individual or group should be excluded from a discussion because of their apparently incompatible values.

Third, inconsistencies and inadequacies of value sets can also present in the form of ethical policy dilemmas, which are often very rich areas for group reflection and collaboration. For example, one time-honored way of encouraging the departure of a dictator or belligerent armed actor is to offer them a 'golden handshake' – retirement to a home somewhere with a friendly government where they can live out their lives in comfort. On the one hand, such an approach gets them out of the way, perhaps putting a stop to whatever oppression and violence they have been involved in. But on the other, such treatment, offering impunity in this way, flies in the face of justice and sets bad precedent. This seems theoretical, but with the limited means of persuasion at the disposal of the international community in any event, it's a critical dilemma – how does the international community encourage a Kony (leader of the Lord's Resistance Army) to leave the bush, or a

despotic head of state to step down, if all that is on offer for them is a trial at the International Criminal Court and imprisonment?

So inconsistencies and dilemmas, although they may appear problematic, actually can be entry points for discussion and change.

Strategies for Values-based Change

The third observation was that ‘fostering values -based change requires us to develop different strategies’.

If we accept the premise that values are a useful entry point into policy work, then it follows that we need to develop strategies for engagement with policy-makers that are designed to open up values-based discussion. Now, there are as many policy advocacy strategies as there are organizations doing policy advocacy, but what I’d like to do here is to highlight some of the strategies that we have found effective, and which we believe to be consistent with this idea of values as an important entry point.

If we are to engage with policy makers where they are, then the starting point is to listen, to try to understand where your interlocutor is coming from. This is something that Quakers have been doing for a long time – listen to this quote from the diaries of John Woolman, an American Friend born in Burlington NJ in 1720, as he considered engaging in a different way with American Indians:

“ a concern arose to spend some time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they might be in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of truth among them.” John Woolman, 1763

Note that this approach is based on humility: on listening first, seeking to understand and learn, and only then moving on to consider the possibility that we might have something to contribute as well. This is very much an ‘inside’ strategy, and is worlds away from more oppositional ‘name and shame’ approaches.

By definition, a strategy based on listening requires one-on-one or small group meetings, at least in the early stages. It is not a coincidence that the main program spaces at the Quaker UN Offices in New York and Geneva are home-like – a living-room and a dining room, ideal for small group work. Indeed, to get diplomats and officials to engage at a values level, it is essential to create a safe environment, where our counterparts can feel able to move beyond national negotiating positions and connect in a different way. To foster this, most of our meetings are off-the record.

It has also been our experience that small group meetings can be structured in such a way as to favor the possibility of transformative outcomes – which is to say, that ideas emerge that no one brought into the room with them. This requires not only a safe space, but also open ended structuring of the meeting and active facilitation to draw out quieter voices and different perspectives. This is not always easy, and can only happen if the ground is prepared and the space opened.

We have also found it useful to engage as much as possible at the level of fundamental values and direct experience rather than at a theoretical level. We have found that making connections to policy-makers’ own life experiences, or exposing them to the personal reality of those impacted by their decisions (for example, by bringing local partners to New York) is particularly effective.

Above all, our experience has been that the manner in which we go about our work and interactions with diplomats, UN officials and civil society is as important over the long term as are the program

choices of the day. Peace and justice work requires of us that we conduct ourselves peacefully and justly. As we call for people to be treated with respect and dignity, we need ourselves to treat others accordingly. A phrase that we use to describe this approach is that “the means are the ends in the making” – that the “how” is as important as the “what”.

Examples

But what does this look like in practice? Here are a couple of examples.

As you may be aware, last fall the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – 17 goals and 169 targets for wiping out poverty, eliminating inequality, promoting sustainability, building peaceful and inclusive societies, and tackling climate change. These Sustainable Development Goals expand on the Millennium Development Goals, which expired at the end of last year, and are universal in application, applying as much to Norway and the US as to Burundi and Timor Leste. Over the past four years, QUNO has worked to ensure that the goal of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies was included in the final version, but there was substantial resistance to the idea of including issues as controversial as good governance, and more inclusive decision making. An approach that we used consistently was to appeal to basics –that violence is a fundamental dimension of human suffering, as much part of the lives of the poorest as poverty and hunger. Although apparently very simple, we found that this approach had strong resonance with many constituencies. For anyone with experience of environments of extreme poverty, whether in villages or cities, in their own countries or elsewhere, this proposition seemed self-evident. Connecting to both fundamental values and direct experience, this framing cut through much of the political ‘noise’ around the peace issues, and had the effect of changing the discussion from WHETHER peace would be included, to HOW it should be addressed.

In another example, my colleagues in Geneva and Bonn worked for two years with negotiators around the process that led up to the recent Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Their primary program tool was to arrange a series of small dinners, quiet conversations with delegates selected across the range of negotiating blocks. They structured each dinner so as to emphasize the common ground between the delegates, basing each gathering around a small number of questions, or queries. These could be as simple as “What kind of a future would you like for your grandchildren?”, but the impact over time was to increase the flow of novel ideas and ways forward, and to reinforce in delegates’ minds the notion that they could be working together to identify approaches to one of the greatest challenges of our time, rather than squaring off through repeated statements of national positions.

So in our experience, strategies that have been effective in values-based work include listening, reaching out, making connections to real people’s lives, and creating safe spaces for new ideas to emerge.

Conclusion

To conclude then, our work over many decades at the United Nations suggests that

- First, values are a legitimate and effective entry point for policy work. Indeed, that’s where change starts;

- Second, that progress is often made through engaging with the inconsistencies in the values that people hold; and
- Third, that fostering values based change requires us to develop different strategies that (for us) include listening, reaching out, making connections to real peoples' lives and creating safe spaces for new ideas to emerge

To finish I'd like to read you one more quote, from the writings of Duncan Wood, one of the early Directors of QUNO Geneva, on the role of accompanying policy makers at the UN in a way that is rooted in values, yet takes into account the complexity and constraints on those making the decisions:

“Since we are not in a position of power, the dilemmas are not ours to solve, the choices not ours to make. From time to time [we may be] brought close to those who [do] have to find the solutions and make the choices. On such occasions it may or may not be given to us to make suggestions which promote the better of two choices or solutions; [but] it is more important that we express our conviction that decisions affecting the lives of multitudes cannot be dictated by worldly expedients but must be taken, as we would express it, “under concern”. We must not suppose that those in authority are unaware of this, but we must recognize that their liberty of action is often circumscribed by the nature of their office: the powerful are not necessarily free. We, who are freer than they are to follow what we believe to be the will of God, may at times be called upon to stand beside them as they seek for light on the road to peace.” Duncan Wood

Thank You

Andrew D. Tomlinson