

National Association for the Practice of Anthropology

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Why the UN Needs Anthropologists

Eva Friedlander, NAPA Secretary

When I mention my work at the UN, people are often impressed, although a blank expression belies confusion as to what an anthropologist could possibly be doing there. Just how an anthropologist comes to play a role in a highly political and bureaucratic environment seems for some hard to fathom. But, working intermittently with the UN in a variety of capacities over the past quarter century has brought home just how important an arena it is for anthropologists to bring their expertise and the pathways for making that possible.

Here I address what anthropologists can contribute to policy deliberations as well as program planning and implementation for those interested in international work.

An intergovernmental body, the UN provides space for official representatives of 193 member states to discuss, debate and negotiate the critical issues of the day. Peace and security have been core issues, but over the years the UN has increasingly dealt with such interrelated issues as sustainable development, racism, climate change, migration, information technology, indigenous rights, nuclear energy, population, child protection among many, many others.

Most important, the guiding philosophy of the UN, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, resonates with the humanistic underpinnings of anthropology that speak to the unity of the human experience while also appreciating the very real differences among us.

Not surprisingly, the ground level, in-depth experience of the lived realities of the peoples with whom anthropologists work, provides an insider perspective invaluable across the board, one more often than not missing in discussions of any topic.

Similarly, a cross-cultural perspective brings multiple lenses and interpretations that demand consideration of context and meaning, whether in policy-making or program design, implementation, and evaluation. The complexities in transformations of meaning and interpretation from local to global require a nuanced understanding of social and cultural diversity. While problematizing efforts to bring change in any predictable manner, this understanding also helps forestall many more common missteps.

Finally, a qualitative methodological focus is an important corrective to the push to quantify and reduce much of human experience to numbers. Fortunately, there is growing appreciation of the contribution qualitative information can make to analysis, to development of indicators, to help to track change, and identify constraints and opportunities.

Although anthropologists can bring their expertise to the work of the UN as staff, servicing the intergovernmental process, the institution also relies heavily on consultants to provide substantive input, i.e. information and analysis needed to further negotiations and implement decisions taken. With expertise in relevant areas, anthropologists can be prime candidates for consultancies. Last but not least, they can play an important advocacy and educational role as part of the civil society organizations they work for and represent, or as individuals,

The ultimate accountability to - and influence of - civil society has been recognized since the UN's inception and form the basis for such bodies as the UN Commission on Human Rights, the Commission on the Status of Women, and most recently the new agency, UN Women, largely the fruit of civil society efforts.

Space and procedural mechanisms enable civil society engagement in different ways, some through the Committee of Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGO), an umbrella organization, others through independent collaboration around specific issues. Various committees parallel UN agencies and processes to influence official meetings, the relationship facilitated by the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Office (NGLS).

Although civil society involvement is contested, cooperation can take place. For example, the International Women's Anthropology Conference (IWAC) which has consultative status with ECOSOC and that I represent, has been active in a variety of ways to maintain common ground. One example is a panel organized at the 17th meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) that informed and brought together civil society and government delegates around issues of women, agriculture and land.

As the UN comes under unprecedented attack from the US right wing, understanding its value as the sole existing space for multilateral deliberation regarding the pressing issues of our time is critical. Its problems and shortcomings need to be acknowledged, understood, and thoughtfully addressed rather than form the basis for its dismemberment. Throwing out the baby with the bathwater is not an option. Practicing anthropologists, with all they have to contribute, need to put their heads together as to how to strengthen and make this amazing experiment in diversity work to the benefit of us all.

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