

ehps report

"Connecting the Dots": EHPS and the United Nations

Conference report of the *64th Annual United Nations Department of Public Information Non-Governmental Organizations (UN DPI/NGO) Conference*, 3rd-5th September 2011, Bonn, Germany

Invoking its audience in one of the opening keynote speeches, renowned ecological activist and feminist Vandana Shiva exhorted an alarming proportion of 60% of the world's ecosystems to have exceeded their capacity for renewal. The current ecological state, eminent threats and its repercussions for humanitarian affairs call for urgent action not only by the United Nations (UN), various governments and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), but also crucially that of communities and individuals of the civic society —henceforth the 64th annual UN Department of Public Information/NGO Conference (UN DPI/NGO)'s integrated theme of 'Sustainable Societies; Responsive Citizens'. 'Sustainable Societies' encompasses the need to disregard economical development and ecological conservation as antagonistic to one another, but instead entreat the undertaking of a new economic paradigm that integrates both domains. 'Responsive Citizens', on the other hand, embraces the notion of empowering citizens to bring about engaged and informed societal members capable of contributing to the promotion and advocacy of sustainable development. The 64th annual UN DPI/NGO Conference provided an important platform for NGOs representatives to showcase their current work in areas relevant to sustainability and ecological conservation, contribute to international discussions about UN-related activities, forge networks with other NGOs, and to develop pre-agenda for the upcoming Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012. Having highly anticipated its new status

as an UN-affiliated NGO this year, EHPS saw its first participation in the annual UN DPI/NGO Conference in Bonn, Germany, in September 2011. The need to "connect the dots", an appeal by the UN's Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon to understand the inter-relationships between climate change, water, food and energy (UN DPI/NGO, 2011) was a theme repeatedly resonated throughout the conference. This view stresses the importance of understanding the interconnectedness and intricacies between the current world challenges we are facing: pollution, hunger, poverty, economic inequality, illiteracy, population dynamics and human rights infringement to name a few. It is essential to tackle these global problems holistically while considering the interconnectedness between them. EHPS can certainly form a major thrust to this noble vision with its key assets and interests, but we must first seek to "connect our dot" with the UN, its related agencies and the work they are pursuing. This conference report presents a summary of the EHPS Bonn Conference delegates' reflections, conclusions and recommendations. It is hoped that this article will serve as an emergence for EHPS and its members to consider the potential role we can play as an UN-affiliated NGO, and how we can join the global forces in their pursuit to tackle world challenges concerning the humanity at large.

**Alden Lai &
Golan Shahr**

*University of Tokyo &
Ben-Gurion University of the
Negev*

Main themes and principles

The conference was held in the form of roundtable discussions, workshops and youth initiatives running in parallel. Through our participation in various sessions, we identified several recurring themes and principles relevant to this UN DPI/NGO conference:

Activism: A stance taken by citizens of all nations to fight, in a democratic fashion for issues of common interest: democracy, economy, ecology, sustainability and health.

Civic Society: A society comprised of free, volitional and active individuals who work together to pursue their interests and well-being.

Climate Change: A long-term change in weather conditions due to numerous processes including global warming, floods, volcanism etc.

Department of Public Information (DPI): serves as the public voice of the UN, promoting global awareness for the UN's work. DPI also works closely with NGOs to assist them in pursuing their causes (see <http://unic.un.org/around-world/unics/en/whoWeAre/aboutDPI/index.asp>)

Green Economy: An economic system that is concerned not only with fiscal growth and prosperity but also with the ecosystem, social equity and well-being. Green Economy is a core value advocated by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP).

Illiteracy: 20% of the world is still illiterate, and 67.4 million children are not enrolled in schools (United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2011). Literacy is a basic human right, but it is highly lacking at the global scale, adversely affecting individuals' civic

participation and volunteerism, and in turn their ability to address global problems.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs): Organisations founded by individuals or institutions operating independently from governments, which are working in the interest of common good. They are the epitomes of active participation and volunteerism, which was the focus in this conference.

Ecosystem Pollution: An introduction to the environment toxic materials (contaminants) that harm the natural environment in various ways. Pollution causes considerable health problems, including respiratory and cardiovascular disease, rashes, birth defects, neurological symptoms and cancer.

Food, Energy and Water Security: Humans' basic needs of food, energy and water are being compromised with environmental degradation and non-sustainable development. Sustainable practices must be advocated in ensuring the security of these essential items to meet the needs of the current population and future generations.

Poverty and Hunger: The lack of material possessions, particularly financial means, quintessential for human survival. The exact definition and quantification of poverty is highly contested, but it was estimated that over a billion people around the world are poor, and that millions die from poverty-related causes. Hunger is a drastic manifestation of poverty – many children are suffering from malnutrition globally, and this irrevocably affects their physical and psychological development.

Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development: This upcoming UN conference will be held in Brazil between June 4th – 6th 2012, marking the 20th anniversary of

the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (see <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/>). Rio+20 has been referred to by many in this conference's panels and is much anticipated, as many of the principles and plans for actions laid out almost two decades earlier have not been implemented.

Volunteerism: Individuals' tendency and capacity to act on behalf of themselves, others, and the common good without expecting remuneration. It is a key manifestation of active civil participation, and a crucial vehicle for sustainable development.

In an attempt to categorise the salient themes and principles relevant to this UN DPI/NGO Conference, we derived four main groups: 'Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)', 'Challenges for Sustainable Development', 'Paradigms' and 'Agents' (refer to Figure 1). The MDGs are eight specific global targets committed by world leaders in September 2000 to achieve by 2015 (see <http://www.un.org/millennium-goals/bkgd.shtml>), with three of them being reflected as recurrent themes in this year's conference. Eminent from these categories are the existence and interplay of diverse issues, frameworks and stakeholders relevant to sustainable development – further accentuating the need to “connect the dots”.

Conclusions and recommendations

The authors proffer five conclusions from this UN DPI/NGO Conference, simultaneously offering recommendations for EHPS's considerations. First, health psychology is a discipline intimately tied to public health, public policy and politics, especially with its twofold competitive edge within the health sciences: (1) the focus on psychological processes, and (2) the emphasis it puts on these processes by employing research

methods common in psychological science. Researchers in psychology, however, tend to overlook other disciplines as they over-occupy themselves with the elegance of their concepts and methods (Taylor, 2009). This conference not only strongly highlighted the link between health psychology and medical research and health policies, but also other fields such as ecology, economics and political science. With respect to this, we believe it is high time for health psychology and EHPS to actively pursue knowledge and initiate contact with experts in these diverse fields. It is also pertinent to keep in mind the international-global nature of UN's operations. While EHPS is understandably a Europe-based society, it should still seek to broaden its reach beyond Europe to allow more rapid transfer of knowledge, extensive opportunities for research collaborations, and greater influence on policy-related matters. On the same note, 'Global Partnership in Development' is also listed as one of the MDGs. The authors further recommend the branching out of health psychology into other disciplines and the increase of its international-global scale to be reflected in EHPS's two key publications, *Psychology & Health* and *Health Psychology Review*.

The second conclusion is the difference in the



Figure 1. Categorised list of salient themes and principles

nature of EHPS as an academic society, as compared to the majority of NGOs present at this conference. Being current organisations implementing actual practice directly relevant to, or advocating sustainable living/development, these NGOs are involved in participatory programmes in direct contact with certain community groups; EHPS on the other hand primarily consists of academics, professionals and graduate students involved in the specific field of health psychology. This difference renders some form of discrepancy between EHPS and other NGOs in terms of the roles we can play in particular at the UN DPI/NGO Conference. Being aware of this discrepancy is crucial, but it does not undermine EHPS's potential contributions in future conferences; EHPS can instead offer its key assets of expertise in the study of health from a psychological perspective, and further serve as a pivotal point between academics, UN and its agencies, governments, other NGOs, and community activists/citizens (see UN Academic Impact <http://academicimpact.org/index.php>). With each group of stakeholders providing their separate set of perspectives and concerns, teamwork among all is, and will be the sought-after paradigm for tackling global issues like sustainable development and empowering citizens.

Thirdly, in stark comparison to the 63rd UN DPI/NGO Conference, which had a central theme of 'Advance Global Health: Achieve the MDGs', there was an apparent lack of mention about health or health-related outcomes at the 64th Conference. We felt a strong need to advocate health as an ultimate objective in UN's DPI/NGOs' envisioned goals, instead of viewing it as by-product while striving to achieve the MDGs. EHPS could thus form a coalition with other UN-affiliated NGOs also having health as an important agenda, and this 'Health UN-NGO Network' should interact synergistically and congregate to advocate health as an ultimate

goal to achieve in future conferences via collaborative organising of workshops/symposia. Similarly, EHPS could also strengthen its ties with an estimated dozen other UN-affiliated professional psychological associations, joining the collective effort to apply psychological science as a tool to realise UN's work.

The fourth conclusion links the major notions of civic engagement and volunteerism in this conference with that of basic psychological science. The theme of agency has emerged as an intriguing topic of interest across diverse disciplines such as neuro-cognitive, developmental, social and personality psychology. Individuals are depicted as forward looking, goal-oriented, and intentional (Amati & Shallice, 2007; Austin & Vancouver, 1996) and such qualities are further relevant in one of the author's work on psychotherapy intervention (Shahar, 2010; Shahar & Davidson, 2009). Embracing the theme of agency would enable health psychology as a field—and EHPS—to position itself as a bridge between basic (neuro)psychological sciences and public policy.

Lastly, youth participation, both on the part of EHPS and that of UN DPI/NGO should be emphasised. Youth delegates representing various NGOs were able to gather together and brainstorm, propose and present ideas for the 'Road to Rio+20 Global Youth Mobilisation Initiative' (see <http://www.roadtorioplus20.org/>) during youth workshops. This initiative subsumes under Rio+20 Conference as a platform for youths to contribute their share of ideas and beliefs towards sustainable development and the positive changes they envision for the future. Differing from the main workshops, youth workshops comprised of a higher degree of interaction between delegates and opportunities for youths to voice their opinions during proposals and presentations, which ultimately lead to an adoption of Youth Rio+20 goals.

Participation in such youth workshops has multiple advantages—increasing awareness of other youth activities, mutually educating/introducing about one's NGOs, creating a sense of camaraderie as youths commit to Road to Rio+20 benchmarks, and lastly forming an instrumental network of youths with visions for the future. EHPS is strongly recommended to send youth delegates to future DPI/NGO conferences or other relevant activities in lieu of these significant benefits.

EHPS's participation in the 64th annual UN DPI/NGO Conference was an important milestone in celebrating our formal association with the UN. We believe that the insights gained from this conference, coupled with the appointments of EHPS representatives to the UN and the recent emergence of an EHPS-UN committee would be instrumental in allowing EHPS to ally itself with the UN, and in the process contribute to societal good. ■

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The authors' individual reports can be retrieved from the 'EHPS at the UN' section of the EHPS website.



Alden Lai

is a master of public health candidate at the School of Public Health, University of Tokyo.

aldenlai@m.u-tokyo.ac.jp



Golan Shahar

is professor of psychology at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and visiting professor of psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine, The Stress, Risk and Resilience Lab