

Advocacy Agenda From The Stanley Foundation's "UN on the Ground" Project

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The Stanley Foundation's "UN on the Ground" project held a series of meetings between 2001 and 2003 focusing on the UN humanitarian agencies, funds, programs, and departments. The discussions—involving about 30 humanitarian professionals and diplomats chaired by Thomas G. Weiss of the Ralph Bunche Institute—looked for ways the agencies could better understand local actors and other aspects of the conflict environment.

Five concrete recommendations emerged from this process:

- ⌘ When the Security Council members try to assess humanitarian situations by going to the ground themselves, they need itineraries that give them good (and not rushed) exposure to the perspectives of locals and aid workers there. And they also need preparation to give them some real background to work with before they go.
- ⌘ Our project participants noted that discussion of humanitarian affairs at the United Nations is often dominated by member states working to quash certain initiatives on the grounds of national sovereignty—with scant regard for the practical effects on people most directly affected. Diplomats in New York who are supportive of humanitarian action must be proactive in countering obstructionist states and highlight the humanitarian implications of such issues. A stronger Humanitarian Liaison Working Group, Humanitarian Liaison Information Group, and ad hoc "friends of" groups could be integral to this.
- ⌘ One key way the different agencies could work together better is if their staff walked in each other's shoes more. While the development, nutritional, agricultural, human rights, and children's rights dimensions of humanitarian response all relate to one another, most staff spend their careers in just one agency. There should be a special relief and development career track set up that would rotate personnel among the agencies. Short of that, secondments should be made easier. To pave the way, the Secretariat's Department of Management should commission a study of the patterns of and impediments to the exchange of staff between agencies.
- ⌘ When key managers such as country directors or resident coordinators move posts, the agencies, funds, and programs do not have good hand-off procedures to retain the institutional memory of the outgoing leader. We propose all agencies give country directors a several-week period of reflection and writing during which they can develop a solid exit memo. It is important that field managers be located somewhere removed from the press of day-to-day work. They could work on their hand-off report in an institute or university in their headquarters city or some suite of UN offices that is separate from their main home office.
- ⌘ In order to foster interchange between academics and practitioners, a program should be established whereby managers in the field could apply to have a specialist expert spend a brief period of time (2-3 weeks) with them. The expert would provide advice on particular issues and challenges they face. The Stanley Foundation is coordinating with the Social Science Research Council, which administers a number of similar programs, and will look for potential sources of funding.