

## News From the SIOP-United Nations Team

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The seventh annual Psychology Day at the United Nations convened on April 24, 2014 at the UN Headquarters in New York. Under the banner *Psychology's Contributions to Sustainable Development: Challenges and Solutions for the Global Agenda*, the conference marked an annual tradition between the United Nations and psychologists from around the world in showcasing the benefits psychology brings toward addressing contemporary issues.

This year's theme focused on the three pillars of sustainable development—social, economic, and environmental—which together reflect the “people-centered” agenda of the UN. Cochair and SIOP Fellow Lori Foster Thompson set the tone for the conference with opening remarks that highlighted the unique role that psychology, including I-O, can play in shaping international public policy and social change. Foster Thompson claimed that, “It is through people and an understanding of people that we can eradicate poverty, transform our societies

and economies, and form a global partnership where psychology is at the very center of a people-centered agenda.”

Through a series of speeches and panel discussions, the event explored how psychology already is assisting in achieving this aim and how psychologists can help to further the process.

Representing Psychology Day's 2014 co-sponsor (the Mission of El Salvador to the United Nations), H. E. Ambassador Reuben Hasbun<sup>1</sup> spoke candidly on the gulf between psychology research and its integration into international policy and practice. Despite growing contributions to world issues, he acknowledged: “The issue of psychology may not be an obvious topic of discussion for diplomats.” Like all political organizations, most UN-led initiatives, Ambassador Hasbun admitted, are driven by constituency groups. Without such a lobbying group championing its cause, psychology has been absent from most UN internal discussions, resulting in a peripheral perception of psychology as

pertinent only to issues of clinical health, and specifically to disability.

The ambassador proposed “creating a place for discussion” between psychologists and the UN. While psychologists can—and do—bring issues relevant to UN-focused goals to the forefront of debate, the ambassador, as well as subsequent speakers, shared frustrations regarding the present state of the dissemination of psychological findings. Psychologists may better engage with policy and sustainable development, he advised, by “translating” findings in ways that are more easily accessible and understandable by decision makers. Using the extant language and policy frameworks within the UN can assist in this process.

The keynote address, *Designing Public Policy: A Person-Centric Approach*, presented by Dr. Maya Shankar, Senior White House Policy Advisor and social psychologist, presented a powerful illustration of how quality psychological research can be translated simply into effective policy. Leading a centralized team of behavior and evaluation experts, Dr. Shankar described her task of assisting federal agencies in identifying low-cost behavioral science insights that can improve outcomes and efficiency of federal aims.

Evidencing how abstract psychological findings can be clearly and effectively translated into concrete programs and policies, Dr. Shakar outlined the “EAST”

method, which she and her team use in designing and evaluating federally-funded interventions, domestically and abroad. The method, drawing from best practices in the behavioral and social sciences, requires that all proposed interventions be (a) easy to use and understand, (b) attractive to the intended recipients, (c) integrative of social norming in order to encourage persistent positive behaviors, and (d) timely, in terms of being sensitive to optimal uptake timing. By ensuring that projects conform to these evidence-based principles, she claimed that “research from the social and behavioral sciences can help us design policies that are more effective, less costly, and better serve citizens.”

Subsequent discussions returned to the need for psychologists to do more in assisting the global development agenda. Dr. Sathasivian Cooper, president of the International Union of Psychological Science, argued: “We are not doing what we should to propagate the values and utilities of this great behavioral and social science.” He extolled the unique contribution psychology offers decision leaders, and lamented its absence from the public forum. “Psychologists can predict contemporary issues and human conflicts and improve the course of others, and yet we have not made ourselves fully available to be understood and accessible to policy makers.” Professor of International Business, Management and Psychology at Columbia University Dr. Elke Weber, reit-

erated this shared perspective: “[Psychologists] have to make the future and the long-term less abstract,” she said, during an open discussion between panelists and the audience.

Following comments from H. E. Ambassador Kintu Nyago, deputy permanent representative of the mission of Uganda to the UN, Psychology Day concluded with an optimistic look toward the future. Cochair Rashmi Jaipal, NGO representative to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) for the American Psychological Association (APA), noted that the event itself highlighted the growing trend of inclusion of psychology in the discussion of international issues. She repeated the claim that each speaker had made throughout the day, “Psychologists can help to implement sustainable development goals... [and] help build sustainable societies and a sustainable future.”

The undercurrent of concern pertaining to psychology’s implicit ability to explain and predict human behavior and its underuse and misunderstanding by non-psychologists echoed sentiments shared during this year’s SIOP Conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. SIOP President

Tammy Allen revealed the current emphasis of SIOP on building bridges of understanding and application between I-O psychologists and society. Within SIOP, such actions are already well underway, with the SIOP being granted NGO special consultative status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 2011. This special standing allows SIOP representatives to work collaboratively with the UN toward achieving its diverse initiatives through providing skills, pro-bono work, and expertise. For more information about SIOP’s work with the UN, please view our page on My.SIOP. The Global Organization for Humanitarian Work Psychology (GOHWP), an international organization of I-O psychologists and others, works toward similar aims by advancing the humanitarian applications of work psychology around the world. You can learn more about GOHWP’s activities and purposes [here](#).

<sup>1</sup> President of the Fourth Committee of the General Assembly; vice-president of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC); permanent representative of the Mission of El Salvador to the United Nations; vice-chair of the Committee on the Status of Women; vice-chair of the Commission for Social Development.

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