

**Conclusions for the 64th Annual United Nations DPI/NGO Conference
Bonn, Germany, 3-5th September**

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Participation:

- Roundtable sessions
- Youth workshops (Rio+20 and Green Economy initiatives)
- Specific Workshops:
 - Designing the transition to sustainable societies: the role of education in engaging citizens
 - Moving to sustainable living through education, gender equity and sustainable economic initiatives
 - Volunteerism: intergenerational opportunities for a sustainable future
 - Re-assessing the role of young people in tackling climate change: a case of youth participation

Background

Given that 60% of ecosystems have reached saturation points and exceeded their capacity for renewal, this annual UN DPI/NGO Conference calls for urgent action not only by the UN, governments and NGOs, but most importantly the community at large. The main themes of the 2011 Conference are 'Sustainable Societies and Responsive Citizens' – the former embraces the notion of empowering citizens, especially capitalising on volunteerism to bring about engaged and informed citizens who will in turn feed into the promotion and advocacy of sustainable development. The latter, 'Sustainable Societies', refers to breaking down the wall between economical development and ecological conservation. The requirement of a new economic paradigm integrating both development and environment, and the need disregard them as antagonistic to one another was being mentioned repeatedly throughout the Conference. In general, this Conference provided an important platform for NGO representatives to showcase their current work in areas relevant to sustainable living, network among various representatives, and to develop pre-agenda for the upcoming RIO+20 Conference scheduled in June 2012.

What can EHPS contribute to the UN DPI/NGO Conference

While knowledge gained from this Conference was very instrumental for me to gain insights about the current practice various NGOs have in place for sustainable development/environmental preservation, the main observation that deserves the most highlighting is the difference between the nature of NGOs present at this Conference and that of EHPS. NGOs represented at the Conference are mainly current organisations implementing actual practice relevant to, or advocating sustainable living/development.

They are involved in participatory programmes in direct contact with certain community groups, like conducting workshops or distributing informative materials to list some basic examples. 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 to the UN DPI/NGO Conference. Being aware of this discrepancy is crucial, and it does not at all undermine EHPS's potential contributions to future DPI/NGO conferences. In fact, I see this difference as an excellent platform for EHPS to contribute in a unique way other NGO organisations could not. These contributions can be in the form of organised workshops in future conferences.

I hereby propose three potential areas EHPS can contribute to DPI/NGO Conferences in future:

1. **Provide** expertise on how Health Psychology can contribute in the area of sustainable development

Knowledge in Health Psychology can contribute to certain areas of sustainability. Given UN's goals to effectively mobilise wide communities at large to adopt more sustainable ways of living and functioning within the society, theories of behavioural models can be instrumental to show how we can better motivate such changes in citizens to achieve minimal environmental impact while developing sustainably. Psychological states of health can also be assessed in specified populations to document outcomes in communities with a high degree of sustainability in comparison to those lacking it, therefore further strengthening positive consequences of sustainable living. The influence of roles social support/cohesion and familial ties can play in volunteerism, and therefore sparking opportunities for sustainable future was also mentioned in one of the workshops I attended. As all participants have to be highly selective in the workshops they attend (all run in parallel), it is beyond my scope to list comprehensively all areas Health Psychology can contribute in an academic manner. However, as seen from above there is a huge potential to bridge theories and practice between EHPS and other NGOs affiliated with UN.

2. **Advocate** health as an ultimate objective rather than a positive spinoff

Shared by Dr. Golan, the 63rd (last year's) Annual UN DPI/NGO Conference had a central theme of 'Advance Global Health: Achieve the MDGs'. A glimpse at the contents revealed workshop themes to centre on health improvements as positive markers of sustainable development. This is very encouraging as health occupied the limelight for last year's conference, but in comparison there was very little mention about health effects or health-related outcomes during the workshops in this year's conference. I strongly feel that there is a need to advocate health as an ultimate objective in UN's goals instead of viewing upon it as by-product while striving to achieve the MDGs. This can be done via the organisation of a 'health NGO network', which I think essentially can be a coalition of NGOs that are affiliated to the UN and also have health as an important agenda. This 'health NGO network' will be able to interact synergistically and highlight further the importance of looking at health through collaborations via workshops, roundtable sessions, or any other kind of event to advocate health improvements as an ultimate goal to achieve.

3. **Serve** as a pivotal point to connect academics, governments and community activists/citizens

One of the messages being emphasized repeatedly was the need to connect academics, governments and community activists/citizens when trying to achieve sustainable living/development/future. If the presence of UN can be said to be representative of the various governments and NGOs that of communities, EHPS can undertake the role of representing academics in the field of Health Psychology to bring about holistic perspectives and solutions relevant to sustainability. With each group of representatives providing their separate set of perspectives and concerns, teamwork among all is, and will be the paradigm for tackling global issues like sustainable development and empowering citizens.

What can EHPS gain from the UN DPI/NGO Conference

I see EHPS's participation in the Conference as an interactive process of knowledge sharing. While the above highlights possible areas EHPS can contribute to future conferences, EHPS can also similarly gain from the NGOs' showcase of activities. To cite an example, I attended a workshop on 'Eco-villages', which are small communities living in designated areas of high sustainability. Everyday living conditions are modified to have minimal impact on the environment, and the villagers are also highly engaged in community activities to protect and care for their physical environment. It is said that these Eco-villages living laboratories of sustainable living, therefore acting as a rich source of information for any health psychologist wishing to delve into research with regards to health outcomes/effects or the psychological mechanisms of people living in highly sustainable environments.

What can EHPS contribute in general to UN Activities

On a broader scale, EHPS can also possibly contribute to future UN activities via participation in the UN Academic Impact initiative. The UN Academic Impact is a recent initiative looking at the invaluable role academic institutions and education have in strengthening the UN's work, assessing the impact of lack of access to education in children worldwide, illiteracy, ways to transform educational environments, health impacts of education and the possible effects of having a coalition of university networks to work on a certain discipline to name a few. Quintessentially it acts as a propelling force to further strengthen the connection between academic expertise and needed policies or paradigms in various world issues UN is pursuing. I believe that there is a very good match between EHPS's vision/goals and current work with the UN Academic Impact initiative.

Participation in Youth Workshops

Participation in youth workshops was one of the highlights during the Conference for me as youth delegates representing various NGOs were able to come together and brainstorm, propose and present ideas for the Road to Rio+20 global youth mobilisation initiative. This initiative subsumes under Rio+20 Earth Summit as a platform for youth to contribute their share of ideas and beliefs. Youth workshops were organised differently from the normal workshops as there was a higher degree of interaction between delegates and active voices could be 'heard', whereas the latter provided more of an unidirectional sharing session by NGO representatives (there was Q&A, but sometimes barely substantial due to time constraints). Participation in such youth workshops has multifold benefits – learning about the kind of activities other youths are involved in, educating/introducing your own NGO to others, creating a sense of camaraderie as all youths commit themselves to Road to Rio+20 benchmarks, and lastly forming an instrumental network of youths with visions for the future. I strongly recommend EHPS to continuously send youth delegates to future DPI/NGO conferences or other UN activities as the benefits being reaped are significant from my own experience.