

Paving the way for mental health and wellbeing

A New United Nations Sustainable Development Goal - The 65th Annual United Nations DPI/NGO Conference

Lisa M. Wu

Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

With the forthcoming establishment of new UN sustainable development goals for 2015, themes of the 65th Annual UN DPI/NGO conference (held from 27-29 August, 2014 in New York) paved the way for dialogue regarding issues that included sustainable management of our natural resources, climate change, human rights, and mental health and wellbeing. Though many of the UN's goals may seem, on the surface to be cursory to the goals of psychologists in research and practice, the UN's recent conference brought to the fore the relevance of our field to the salient and urgent goals affecting our planet. Indeed, as was frequently reported in workshop sessions, the World Health Organization (WHO) has indicated that depression will be the leading global disease by 2030; an alarming prediction that highlights the need for psychologists' involvement in achieving UN objectives. For the first time, the promotion of mental health and wellbeing will be included in the UN's sustainable development agenda for 2015 to 2030.

The numerous workshops and symposia illustrated the diversity of issues as well as the interconnected nature of the challenges affecting us. One workshop that was led by psychologists was entitled, "Promoting mental health and wellbeing for youth in the new post-2015 sustainable development agenda: Psychological principles, science and practices" (sponsored by the International Association of Applied Psychology, the World Council for Psychotherapy, the Psychology Coalition of NGOs at the UN, and the Manhattan Multicultural Counseling Center). Dr. Judy Kuriansky, clinical psychologist and chair of the Psychology Coalition of NGOs, spoke at length about the escalating stresses and mental

health problems facing youth today, including the aforementioned alarming statistic by the WHO regarding depression. She alerted the audience to the fact that a billion young people in the world have mental health problems with only about 20% of them getting the help that they need. Importantly, she emphasized that the world cannot be sustainable unless people's wellbeing is also embraced. It has only been through Drs. Kuriansky and Caleb Otto's (Ambassador to Palau) advocacy that mental health and wellbeing is now included in the UN's sustainable development agenda. Ambassadors the world over, from New Zealand to Costa Rica to the Philippines, have endorsed this need for governments and policy makers to take this goal seriously, emphasizing its direct impact on economic development.

The terrible plight of youth in refugee camps was hailed as an example of a vulnerable group prone to mental health problems. Maria Pia Belloni and Amber Eriksson of Organisation Mondiale pour l'Education Prescolaire (OMEP) presented on their work with refugee children. They described a disheartening statistic – every 4 seconds someone in the world is forced to flee their home, many of them children, and often due to war. Such children may be forced to move from their home into a tent, their playground becoming the desert of a refugee camp. Such refugee camps include Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan (housing 150,000 refugees) and one of the largest in Dadaab in Kenya (housing 500,000 refugees). In the Dadaab camp, 51% are female and 58% are younger than 18 years of age. These camps save lives in the emergency phase, but extended residence can lead to extremes of behavior in children. Trapped in a "legal limbo," such camps deprive them of the "right to have rights" despite the presence of international

humanitarian actors and entitlements enshrined in international law. Both pre-migration and post-migration stressors severely affect the mental health of children. Often these children have witnessed unspeakable atrocities. They have seen their homes bombed, they have witnessed members of their family or friends killed, and/or they have been brought close to death during their journey to the camp (e.g., the boat people who travel to Australia). Even during their time in the camps, these children may be plagued by feelings of sadness and isolation behind the bars. On Christmas Island, children's drawings often feature bars and locks. Belloni emphasized the importance of education in emergency situations due to its ability to provide psychological, physical, emotional, and cognitive protection. Unfortunately, a majority of children in refugee camps are not enrolled in school. And, when such schools exist, there may be 80 to 100 students per teacher, often poorly trained. Sometimes the classroom may literally exist under a tree. There are a million children under 6 years old living in refugee camps who are deprived of the opportunity to develop their potential – a situation intolerable from humanitarian, human rights, and sustainability perspectives. Eriksson explained that although children are extremely resilient – indeed some take on the role of caregiver for prolonged periods – the harsh conditions that bring them to the camps and camp life itself can lead children to deal with what she termed a “complex compound trauma.” She described imaging studies that have shown that early exposure to traumatic events can change brain structure in children as young as 3 to 6 months of age, and these brain changes are associated with cognitive deficits. Hence, she emphasized that even if a child cannot communicate their grief, it does not mean they do not experience it. Psychosocial health is as important as physical health. Without early intervention and treatment, these children may experience personality and behavioral disorders that persist into adulthood. The OMEP is endeavoring to train people to go into the camps to provide age-appropriate support to these children. They also hope

to train people in these communities, perhaps via Skype or video chat, in order to provide them with the tools to help their own.

The importance of youth was also emphasized in the Right to Not be Left Behind symposium. Ahmad Alhendawi, the UN Secretary General's envoy on youth highlighted that youth engagement in politics is exceedingly small with fewer than 1% of MPs in the world under the age of 30. The youth don't have a voice, yet they are the demographic most likely to be affected by climate change. During my conversations with other conference attendees in the UN cafeteria, I learned that climate change is a likely stress not just on our physical environment, but on the physical and mental well-being of our communities. And yet, the interdependence of our world requires us to educate our youth so that global changes can occur in the future. Courtney White representing the NGO Committee on Education brought this issue to the fore. She talked about the importance of climate change and intergenerational solutions. Different bioregions of the world experience climate change differently. That is, climate change is not going to affect everyone everywhere. Hence, White explained that how we work with youth has to be differentiated. She described a constructive approach that links climate change to everyday emotions and concerns, such as through the use of a new app called “Habitat the game.” In this app, youth become engaged in real world behaviors over which they have self-efficacy and that enhance their understanding of how their lives impact the environment. Apps like these highlight the small changes in behavior that make a difference and help youth to process the negative experiences of other youth around the world.

A second psychology-focused workshop was entitled “Global mental health crisis and a replicable, sustainable intervention,” presented by the team from the Institute for Multicultural Counseling and Education Services (IMCES) and the International Council of Psychologists. The aim of the workshop was to present their cross-cultural research as well as the

development of an intervention that could be transferred to different culturally-diverse communities. Their research has primarily focused on investigating depression around the world by identifying the concept of depression in different communities and the best practices to treat it. Dr. Tara Pir, founder and director of the IMCES stated that there is a “need to support interventions that are not necessarily “evidence-based practices,” but have worked in different communities outside the Western world.” Dr. Marc Borkheim of the IMCES argued that it is “impossible to replicate unique socio-cultural factors of the population of any given mental health clinic in sampling methodologies.” He described the importance of understanding the mental health needs of a particular clinic population through performance evaluation studies. The IMCES team presented some of the findings from their work across the world. One notable study involved the development of the Cultural Stigma Survey by Dr. Pir for research and engagement to bridge direct service and research. Dr. Katrin Malakuti indicated that stigma associated with going to psychotherapy can often be more destructive than mental illness itself. Their goal is to understand the basis of psychotherapy, as well as the desire for a “quick fix.”

Dr. Pir went on to discuss their “Wraparound Program” which is a community-based program that addresses high risk families on multiple levels using a holistic approach that works with the family as a whole, in their homes and natural communities. She described the program as sustainable, because the act of going in to the communities and using members of that community to assist families toward health and wellness is replicable and culturally sensitive. Such principles can be taken to any community in the world.

Consistent with the theme of working with diverse communities, in the aforementioned “Right to not be left behind” symposium, Ignacio Saiz, Executive Director for the Center for Economic and Social Rights, talked about the UN’s Millenium Declaration that reiterated its focus on human rights for women,

minorities and disadvantaged groups. Apparently the goals and targets set in 2001 fell short. The aim of the new sustainable development goals has been to remedy those short falls. From reproductive rights to the rights of the disabled to the rights to have access to justice to women’s rights; numerous speakers spoke about the work that was still needed to ensure human rights are not compromised. It is evident that much work needs to be done and that psychologists have an important role to play, particularly with groups who are most vulnerable to being “left behind.”

As health psychologists, we understand the impact of external factors on physical and psychological health and wellbeing. Thus, despite the diversity of issues present in the UN’s sustainable development goals, the relevance of our discipline to obtaining these goals is only growing. The conference highlighted for me new avenues for involvement by our professional community to improve lives on a global scale.



Lisa M. Wu

Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, Department of Oncological Sciences, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY, USA

lisa.wu@mssm.edu