



A Model of Psychologists as Advocates at the United Nations: The Role of Psychology in Disaster Risk Reduction



General Goals of Psychologists at the United Nations: The role of psychologists representing psychological associations accredited at the UN includes acting as advocates for issues relevant to the field of psychology. This involves:

- (1) Identifying issues relevant to the UN
- (2) Being proactive and taking initiative to demonstrate how psychologists can be effective
- (3) Collaboration among the psychological organizations
- (4) Action (e.g. through presentation of research, organizing workshops, consultation, and writing statements)

Rationale: Psychologists have unique and valuable expertise in areas such as rights of women, children, and the disabled; aging; peace and conflict resolution; culture and diversity; communication; organizational management; social development; resilience; and helping individuals and communities cope with the effects of natural and man-made disasters.

A Recent Example: Advocating for the Role of Psychology in Disaster Risk Reduction

1) Approaching a UN Agency (ISDR)

One of the weekly briefings by the Department of Public Information at the UN included a presentation by Elina Palm, Liaison Officer for the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), headquartered in New York. Of particular interest was her description of an educational board game for children on the topic. A UN representative for a psychological organization (Judy Kuriansky from the International Association of Applied Psychology) approached Palm to meet about exploring ways psychologists can be helpful.

2) Inviting a UN Representative to an Event Attended by Psychologists

The meeting with Palm led to including mention of this UN program (ISDR) at international conferences as a useful collaboration, and discussing such collaboration with the board of the UN NGO Committee on Mental Health (CMH). Palm was subsequently invited to present her work at a monthly meeting of the CMH. At that meeting, she described ways to get involved, including an upcoming conference at UN headquarters in Geneva Switzerland where governments would report their progress in disaster risk reduction as outlined in the Hyogo Framework for Action and where NGOs could participate. Members of the CMH followed up on her suggestions and became further active, by:

3) Attending and Participating at a Major UN Conference CMH representatives (Kuriansky and Weissbecker) traveled to the ISDR "Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction"

Conference in Geneva in June 2007 and engaged in several activities:

a) Submission of Written Statement

Members of the CMH prepared a written statement about the importance of including mental health and well-being in disaster risk reduction, to be distributed at the Geneva meeting. The statement outlined ways in which mental health and psychosocial issues could be included in all five goals of the Hyogo framework, and recommended specific action priorities. This NGO Committee on Mental Health Statement was endorsed by eleven organizations and distributed widely at the conference. The co-sponsoring organizations included the International Association of Applied Psychology, the International Association of Schools of Social Work, the International Council of Psychologists, the International Psychoanalytical Association, the International Union of Psychological Science, MindFreedom Support Coalition International, Soroptimist International, the American Psychological Association, the World Association for Psychosocial Rehabilitation, the World Council for Psychotherapy and the World Federation for Mental Health. This document, is attached and can be downloaded from the Global Platform [website](#).

b) Organization of a Side Event at the Conference

Members of the CMH organized a side event to take place at the Geneva meeting. The panel on "Integration of Mental Health and Psychosocial Issues into Disaster Risk Reduction and the Hyogo Framework for Action," addressed how psychosocial/mental health interventions are an integral part of any

comprehensive program of disaster preparedness and risk reduction, and presented supporting research. The panelists purposefully represented multi-stakeholders, including a high-level UN official, Margareta Wahlström, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; Mark van Ommeren from the World Health Organization, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, who announced the newly released guidelines by the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee, "IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings" ([website](#)) ; and two psychologists representing UN accredited psychological organizations: Inka Weissbecker, who presented about a unique multi-stakeholder model for disaster preparedness and response in developing countries, and Mary Mary K. Weed, discussing the application of frameworks from organizational and social psychology.

c) Conference Participation

Members of the CMH participated in the Media Workshop at the conference, alerting journalists to the role psychologists can play in addressing the issue of climate change and its impact. Further, they participated in several NGO meetings and signed up for committees with the NGO network for disaster risk reduction. In addition, members of the CMH volunteered to coordinate the inclusion of cross cutting issues pertaining to health and mental health within the Global Network of NGOs. They also made a formal statement at the closing session of the conference, outlining the importance of including psychosocial issues in disaster risk reduction.

d) Follow-Up

Follow-up after the meeting included submission of a detailed report that addressed requested "Comments for the 2007 Global Review," to Chair John Holmes and Secretariat Sálvano Briceño, on behalf of the NGO Committee on Mental Health and other psychological organizations. Suggestions for incorporating mental health and psychosocial issues were also submitted for inclusion in the "Global Network of NGOs for Community Resilience to Disasters," a working document by the Global Network of NGOs.

4) Further Follow-up on the Topic at UN conferences

The CMH submitted a midday workshop related to the topic of psychological issues in disaster risk reduction and climate change at the yearly annual meeting of the Department of Public Information/NGO Conference on "Climate Change: How it Impacts Us All," held this past September at UN headquarters in New York. The midday workshop intentionally continued the

theme of the Geneva conference, addressing: "Partnerships to Mobilize Community Health Resources for Recovery, Resilience and Risk Reduction of Climate Related Disasters: What Multi-stakeholders Can Do." Co-sponsoring psychological organizations included IAAP, the UN NGO Committee on Mental Health, the World Federation for Mental Health, the World Council of Psychotherapy (WCP), and American Psychological Association. A high-level UN official was again on the panel: Margareta Wahlström, who had been a speaker the Geneva side event and had demonstrated her commitment to psychological issues. Psychologists participated as organizers, moderator (IAAP psychologist Judy Kuriansky), and presenters. IUPsyS psychologist Inka Weissbecker presented projects involving educational systems and local governments in Belize and Tanzania; WCP psychologist Darylne Nemeth spoke about post-Katrina wellness workshops as a collaboration of religious and community groups, the state psychological society, and local and state government. WCP representatives José Thomé and Susana Pesis de Werthein presented a multi-media project for risk reduction and recovery from economic, social and other types of disasters. The CMH plans to continue work in this important area by developing mutually beneficial partnerships between psychologists, NGO's, country representatives and UN agencies.

Submitted by: Judy Kuriansky, PhD, International Association of Applied Psychology NGO representative and Inka Weissbecker, PhD, International Union of Psychological Science NGO representative.