

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the ethical framework of the United Nations

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Indaba-network, December, 1st 2008

The celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights offers us a good opportunity to start our conversations about “Values-based Organizations”.

On December 10, 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Universal Declaration detailed “the ethical framework” of the *values-based* international organization established three years earlier, on 26 June 1945, when the Charter of the United Nations was signed in San Francisco, coming into force on 24 October 1945.

In the name of their People the representatives of the countries who signed the Charter, committed to those values:

“We the Peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,…”

The role and effectiveness of the Organization of the United Nations, and of its Specialised Agencies, has been often disputed. Some of the failures in granting Peace and respect of fundamental human rights, may well be attributed to some structural aspects linked to the architecture of the organization and its governance: the persistent differentiation between permanent and non-permanent members –for example- could be considered to be in contradiction with one of the founding principles of United Nations, such as “the equal rights ... of nations large and small”.

However, from the ethical perspective that we are exploring here, we are more interested in understanding to what level members of the Organisation have lived up to the values to which they committed, in terms of:

1. relations between individual members (countries represented by their governments),
2. observance of those guiding principles in their own territories (also in respect toward the People in whose name they committed);
3. relations between individual members and the United Nations;

and

4. leaders and executives' capacity to live up to the values of the United Nations.

Organizations are made by people. People who represent member entities (as in the case of the United Nations, where governments representatives speak in the name of member States), people who are directly members of the organisation (as in the case of associations based on individual membership), and people who effectively run the organisation (leaders and executives of the organisation). The capacity of people in the latter group to live up to the stated values of the

Organisation, is possibly the most important factor to preserve the Organisation's adherence to its original goal and ethical identity. They have the highest responsibility in preserving its values, to avoid taking distance from the ideal and values that originated the organization.

Your comments on any of the four points above are welcome, both from a theoretical point of view or from direct experience, whether in relation to the United Nations or to any other organisation you may know or belong.