

# **DPI/NGO Communications Workshop Developing Communications Strategies**

8 December 2005

## Summary

The DPI/NGO Section held an all-day Communications Workshop on 8 December. The Workshop was divided into two parts, a morning panel discussion and an interactive group afternoon session. The Workshop aimed to inform NGO representatives about the importance of developing communications strategies and served to encourage NGO representatives to begin developing a communications strategy for the 59th Annual DPI/NGO Conference.

The morning panel discussion focused on how to create effective communications strategies and the importance of strategic thinking when planning an event. Speakers included Susan Markham, Director, Strategic Communications Division, DPI; Pragati Pascale, Spokesperson, Office of the President of the 60th Session of the General Assembly; Sasa Gorisek, OiC, Information Officer, DPI/NGO Section; and Minky Worden, Media Director, Human Rights Watch. Joan Kirby, Chair, NGO/DPI Executive Committee moderated the session.

Susan Markham focused her presentation on the importance and advantages of developing a communications strategy well in advance of a scheduled event. She emphasized that thinking strategically was an essential tool that allowed for honing in on target audiences and deciding what message to convey. Ms. Markham suggested that NGO representatives consider potential obstacles when developing a communications strategy. With an understanding of possible mishaps, organizers would be better prepared to adapt and adjust strategies without losing ground. Throughout her presentation, Ms. Markham emphasized the need to measure the effectiveness of a communications strategy before, during and after the event.

Minky Worden began her presentation by explaining many of the media strategies implemented by Human Rights Watch. She focused on what NGOs can do to receive further attention in the press. Ms. Worden described how NGOs could manage crisis situations and gave examples of how her organization used the media to convey the situation in Darfur to the public. To conclude, Ms. Worden gave NGO representatives recommendations for how they could approach the press and ensure that their messages were being heard. Some of her suggestions included sharing human-interest stories, contacting media representatives outside of the UN system and developing long-term relationships with members of the press.

Pragati Pascale emphasized how the UN partnership with NGOs could be made stronger by relaying that each needed the other to expand the outreach network. Ms. Pascale noted that in recent years NGOs have become more diplomatic and less vocal. However, if NGOs wanted more media attention, she suggested that they not hesitate to speak more candidly. Because controversies tend to attract more media interest, NGOs had to be willing to speak openly about contentious issues and not be reluctant to make their voices heard.

Sasa Gorisek spoke about the practical implications of developing a communications strategy for the DPI/NGO Conference. She outlined the strategy created and implemented for the 58th Conference and advised NGO representatives to use it as a guideline in the afternoon session when they worked in groups to devise a communications strategy for the 59th Annual DPI/NGO Conference. She indicated the need for participants in the afternoon session to identify the purpose, goal and vision of the Conference and its strategic and communications objectives. Ms.

Gorisek further explained the importance of developing key messages to be delivered to target audiences. She concluded by discussing ways and means of generating media interest.

A question and answer period followed the panel discussion.

A question was raised about how the UN conveyed information to the media so that the relayed message was favourable to the UN. Ms. Markham stated that because the UN had no direct control over what the media wrote, the UN could only provide information to the media in a manner that told the story the way the UN wanted it told. She gave examples of how the UN reached out the media by placing op-eds, arranging interviews with UN officials, disseminating press releases and producing television and radio programmes. Ms. Markham emphasized the important role of the media as a conduit for relaying information and generating public opinion.

An NGO representative asked Minky Worden to give further advice about how to develop long-term relationships with members of the press. Ms. Worden responded by highlighting the importance of personal relationships both within and outside the NGO community. She stressed the importance of the Internet and online communication through list serves, blogs and other online resources. She also encouraged NGO representatives to seek out media representatives outside of the UN system who were more focused on their causes than on the political happenings at the UN.

A question was asked about how NGO op-eds could be placed in major papers. Pragati Pascale suggested that op-eds related to current events were more likely to be published. She also noted that op-eds should not solely be placed in prominent newspapers, but offered to smaller, local print media. Online media could also be used with attention given to geographical distribution.

During the afternoon session of the Communications Workshop, NGO representatives broke into groups to develop communications strategies for each of the five prominent themes that emerged from the 1 December Townhall Meeting. At the Meeting, NGO representatives presented their suggestions for the theme of the 59<sup>th</sup> Annual DPI/NGO Conference. The recommendations were separated into five thematic groups: MDGs, Migration and Employment, Peace and Security, Responsibility and Accountability and Strengthening the UN through Reform and NGO Partnerships.

Joan Levy, Chair, December 2005 Communications Workshop, moderated the afternoon session. She began by introducing each of the group leaders and explaining the task at hand. NGO representatives then split into groups and began discussing possible communications strategies and how they might be implemented. After one hour of group work, the session reconvened and group leaders shared the progress of their groups.

#### Group #1 – MDGs

Suggested that:

- innovative, creative approaches be utilized in Conference planning and its outreach
- non traditional speakers be invited
- Conference fee be charged as a fundraising tool
- the Conference be moved to the Spring so that the results can have a greater impact on UN meetings
- the most important aspect of their communications strategy was building outreach and getting the word out about the Conference
- the Conference serve as a think tank on the MDGs

- there be an online monitoring system in place to allow all to see progress towards achieving the MDGs
- there be a greater effort to incorporate a youth voice into the Conference

#### Group #2 – Migration and Employment

Suggested that:

- there be a pre-Conference NGO briefing on the topic so that NGO representatives have the opportunity to gain better understanding of migration
- the Conference be pegged to an important event or document release so that there is more media interest
- the Conference be sponsored by a UN agency already dealing with the topic
- the following be topics of plenary sessions: the effects of “brain drain” and preserving the cultural identities of migrants in their new communities

#### Group #3 – Peace and Security

Suggested that:

- the following be topics of plenary sessions: how to take monetary incentives out of armament, peace as a human right
- promotional materials be distributed to target audiences (DVDs, CDs, scarves, bracelets)
- non-traditional ways of outreach be developed and should include pop culture icons from the hip hop world, for example
- Conference be televised by at least one major US network and invite TV personalities to speak (Ted Koppel and Oprah Winfrey)
- a prepared statement of the mission of the Conference be given to speakers in advance. Speakers should also receive an outcome document with Conference findings.
- Conference speakers include members of political, military and civilian groups
- the need for peace and security be conveyed to Member States participating in the Conference through written documents, charts and graphic displays
- there be an essay-writing competition for students around the world to write about the theme of the Conference and winners be present at the Conference to read their essays
- the Conference find a way for the topic of peace to be brought back into the UN after having been put aside for war. Through peace and security, reform, achieving the MDGs and many other obstacles could be overcome.

#### Group #4 – Responsibility and Accountability

Suggested that:

- responsibility and accountability of both the UN and NGOs be part of the Conference regardless of its theme either as a plenary session or a workshop
- academic vs. practical approaches to accountability be evaluated
- an expected outcome be that clear guidelines and standards are established to ensure responsibility, accountability and transparency

#### Group #5 – Strengthening the UN through Reform and NGO Partnerships

Suggested that:

- the Conference take a less traditional approach and diversify speakers
- one of the key messages be that the UN would open up to “we the peoples”
- the Conference itself or one plenary session be a simulation of a People’s Assembly
- the final report of the Conference be more of an outcome document than a summary and be a record of the commitments made at the Conference
- NGO resources be identified that could assist governments with the implementation of UN reform

The above suggestions of the group will be discussed further at the first 59<sup>th</sup> DPI/NGO Conference Planning Committee meeting in January 2006.