Specialised Agencies and Other United Nations Organs Working in the Field of Human Rights

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Considering that one of the major aims of the World Conference would be to define and enhance the human rights dimension in the overall work of the United Nations, it is crucial that as a first step towards accomplishing that goal, analyses be undertaken on the manner in which the work of different United Nations bodies, organs and specialised agencies touch upon human rights matters.

For the different organisations, including the Centre for Human Rights, to accept such an obligation, it would be necessary to stress the benefits which could accrue or the discreditable stalemate, if not stagnation, that could ensue should no action be taken.

Special emphasis should, therefore, be placed on stressing our common heritage and our need to respond strategically to the general feelings being conveyed by States and the public that they have "great expectations" of the United Nations while insisting that for the most part these expectations should be realised within very exacting, if not straitjacket-like, financial constraints.

The basic framework in which international organisations are operating is one which may be referred to as a situation of "information and task overload". For the present there is no indication that this problem will disappear. In fact all the signs point to more and more bodies being asked to implement more and more decisions.

To implement a decision normally requires a request for information to be forwarded to various parties. The burden on providing and collecting information is enormous both for organisations and States. Therefore the burden on States of reporting should be used as a tool by which to gain approval for the launching of certain new approaches to the information dilemma.

At present the emphasis on gathering information, as requested by various bodies, has ensured that little time is available for analysing the information received. Yet this task is essential to enable one, at the very least, to identify the gaps existing in the information forwarded and to undertake research to
ascertain exactly whether such “missing” information has not been received elsewhere.

Clearly, therefore, to avoid the duplication of requests for information and to make sure that the different specialised aspects of subjects are being covered by the appropriate organisation, it might be suitable to ask organisations to prepare an informal paper for use in the preparatory process to the World Conference on how their work overlaps or converges on the human rights issue, offering suggestions for filling any gaps in formation and directions the human rights bodies should take to cover issues previously neglected.

To make this exercise most fruitful and attractive to other organisations, one could resort to appealing for “honest” replies. As obviously one must avoid reinforcing the image of co-ordination as a strict winner-loser game, all players must be able to identify tangible advantages for themselves.

On a final general note, it should be understood that one should not discuss future co-ordination and division of labour issues between organisations without addressing the primordial need for everyone’s data to be stored on computers. Therefore, the development of information networks which would be mutually communicatively compatible and assist us in our search for and in the retrieval of information on thematic and subject bases is of immediate concern and interest to all and could also be a matter on which to begin any study of areas for collaboration, which would hopefully at the same time enable organisational work priorities to emerge.

Already with regard to the implementation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, various organisations which may not have traditionally seen a role for themselves as regards protecting and promoting human rights have been willing to recognise that their programmes do influence and have an impact on such matters.

In this respect one might foresee that requests could be made to those organisations already co-operating in the human rights field to undertake specific tasks. The ILO for example could undertake an analysis of provisions in their conventions which relate to those contained in human rights treaties. Requests for analytical studies on the different areas in which an organisation’s work touches upon human rights matters could also be made to UNHCR, UNICEF, WHO, WFP, etc.

For those organisations unwilling to accept such a task, a preliminary study could be undertaken by a human rights body in consultation with the relevant organisation.

Equally, in consideration of the heavy work load of the human rights bodies, it may be appropriate to reflect on the possibility of requesting other organisations to undertake work in matters for which they obviously have