

# A Fireside Chat in Bhutan – by Philip Merry©



## Consulting with the United Nations

I recently facilitated two very United Nations events – one a “fireside chat” with the United Nations country team in Bhutan, the other a conference for 90 senior United Nations executives in a New York hotel, different locations but interestingly enough both concerned with the same thing, reform of the UN. The New York conference dealt with the conceptual and policy frameworks, the Bhutan “chat” with the day-to-day field realities. In New York we were occasionally too hot (problems with the heating system), whilst in Bhutan we had to keep warm against the winter by huddling round a stove log fire. New York felt like a party conference with people raising points of order and reminding us of previous history, in Bhutan it was a family discussing how better to understand and serve the citizens of Bhutan. But both vital and relevant for reforming one of the most important organisations in today’s global world. But I run ahead of myself - let me back up a little – how did I get to be at these fascinating events?

I have always been inspired by any action, project or person that helped bring nations together. I think it began in school. I was raised in Huddersfield in West Yorkshire, UK where there was a large Asian population, so I was always interested in the interaction between cultures. Asia has always felt like my spiritual home, and so I consider myself real lucky to have lived in Asia for 30 years running my own business specializing in helping leaders and teams become better at working with cross cultural issues. This has often focused on large global corporations, but I never lost my desire to go back to my development roots. I began my career as a family therapist in London, so I was very pleased when, in 2001 I was asked to work with United Nations High Commission for Refugees on leadership development. One thing led to another and I am now regularly involved in a variety of leadership and capacity building programmes with different UN agencies in Bhutan, Fiji, Maldives, Papua New Guinea, Turin, Kenya, Ethiopia, Laos and New York.

There is one thing that impacts us all, building of prosperity and understanding between the nations of the world, which I think is important now more than ever. Some people used to say that “Globalisation” would begin to minimize differences, but look at any newspaper and it does not always look that way! Now I know that there is a great movement called “Make Poverty History”, but I prefer to talk about **“Make Partnership, Peace & Prosperity Commonplace”** because it accentuates the positive. I would rather be **“for”** something than **“against”** something, and they do say that what you focus on grows. **When you have true PARTNERSHIP then PEACE follows; and if you have peace then PROSPERITY can flourish. And the UN is stepping up to the plate and really adapting itself to meet this challenge.**

It is fashionable to beat the UN, and the scandals took their toll on the UN image. But it still remains the one global body, which, at the end of the day, is answerable (through our governments) to you and me. In those awful situations we see regularly on our TV screens which tear our heart and that we cannot immediately do much about, I feel comforted when I see the blue beret of the UN. They act on our behalf. So any chance to strengthen the UN is an opportunity I don't pass up. And achieving "partnership, peace and prosperity" for all, is at the heart of most projects that I am involved in. I feel privileged to be asked to be one of a group of worldwide consultants to help the UN work on improving its effectiveness.

Which brings me to my fireside in Bhutan. One of the world's smallest and highest countries, some people have christened it the "last place on the roof of the world". It is a stunningly beautiful but it is also famous for its focus on GNH, Gross National Happiness. Mostly a Buddhist country its king Jigme Singye Wangchuk, began developing policies to enhance "happiness", meaning the overall well-being of the entire country, not just economic wealth. Policies that have continued under the current king.

Bhutan has been a member of the UN since 1971 and although there was always good co-operation between the different agencies in Bhutan the reform process seeks to make it even better. My role in Bhutan was to facilitate a session where the UN country team discussed and made decisions on how to continue to improve their work together. Which is where the log fire comes in. We held the retreat at a small hotel in the mountains just outside the capital Thimpu and I arrived early on our first day to find the room in the process of being heated up by a log burner at one end of the room, the table where we were to hold the meeting was at the other, colder end. It seemed to me that as we were a small group, just heads of agencies, then it would be better if we sat around the fire as this would both enhance communication and keep us warm! It was a great retreat made even more effective by the attendance of some key people from the Bhutanese government and civil society. The end result was an even stronger determination to work hand in hand with the government of Bhutan to achieve progress and "happiness" for all its citizens by focusing on Democratic Governance, Poverty Reduction, Sustainable Energy, Environment and Disaster Risk Management, all with an emphasis on Women's Equality.

And then two weeks later I was in New York, where it was a different audience but the same emphasis i.e. how do all UN agencies work together more effectively on reform. There was lots of good discussion, which at times posed an interesting challenge for my role as the facilitator, keeping 90 people in order who have lots to say was not the easiest job. But I thoroughly enjoyed it and was struck by the incredible dedication in the room full of truly committed people who had given many years of their life to work with some of the world's most difficult problems. The person who gave the closing remarks, Thoraya Ahmed Obaid the Executive Director of UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, the world's largest multilateral source of population assistance, best summed these inspiring people up. Ms. Obaid was appointed head of UNFPA, with the rank of Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and is the first Saudi Arabian to head a United Nations agency. I will never forget her words, "to do this work you need PASSION and COMPASSION, what motivates me is the thought that if today I do one thing that can benefit in some small way one woman, one child somewhere in the world, then the day has been worth it."

I am very lucky to work with some of the world's biggest commercial organizations – and the work gives me great satisfaction as it is all about bringing self-awareness and understanding where people were formerly at loggerheads. But seeing the work of the UN at close hand and being able in some small way to be part of a process that is concerned with building partnership, peace and prosperity in some of the world's most interesting and challenging places is something that truly inspires me.