

From Indigenous Land Rights to the UN: Making a Meaningful Contribution

by AMY WEESNER

I

RECEIVED NEWS OF MY acceptance to LLILAS while living and working in Peru in 2000. I'd been in Peru for the better part of a year teaching English in Cuzco and realized that at 24 I still didn't have the intellectual maturity to really comprehend the widespread

disparities that I observed there and in the world at large. I hoped to go back to graduate school and to have the complexities of Latin America spelled out for me so that I could then focus on how to make a more meaningful contribution to society than I felt I'd made so far. Of course, once I began my graduate studies I soon realized that if anything I'd just signed up for two more years of existential angst.

You see, I struggled during those two years at LLILAS. I struggled with my own idealism about my academic passions and with my own naïve notions of self. There is no doubt that the courses I chose (primarily in geography and anthropology) gave me the tools to explore the complexity that had left me feeling so uninformed before, but each course, each professor, and each trip to the field brought with it the realization that there was so much more that I would never understand and that I probably couldn't change.

My field of study, indigenous territorial rights, meant grappling with a set of social, economic, and environmental justice questions on a scale that could test the idealism of the most dedicated activist. In fact, I remember making the decision to take courses in GIS not just so that I could take part in making some of the first maps of a remote Achuar territory in Ecuador, but also because I desperately needed to create a tangible counterpoint to academic analysis and concomitantly to my own idealism. Luckily, I had chosen an academic environment that not only encouraged interdisciplinary

approaches but also attracted activist faculty. As a result, I learned how to marry the theoretical with some very concrete outputs on a manageable scale. This allowed me to live up to my own ideals and contribute something meaningful to a community I cared about. In short, I remained an idealist but one who learned how to develop realistic expectations. It's a lesson that I've had to apply to just about every job I've had since graduate school and especially since I joined the United Nations.

Indeed, from a social justice perspective, the UN represents just about every lofty ideal—from human rights and development to peacekeeping and peacebuilding. As such it's likely no surprise that the UN can be a dangerous place to work for an idealist. The expectations for this organization are incredibly high, the scale and scope of the humanitarian problems it tries to solve truly complex and global—astronomical even, if you count the UN Office on Outer Space Affairs (yes, it exists). Add to that the unique intergovernmental mechanisms that drive decision-making at the UN plus an outdated politically hamstrung bureaucracy and you get an organization that is destined to disappoint almost anyone.

This is an environment that demands not just a substantive knowledge of a field of study, but also the kind of pragmatic realism that I developed at LLILAS. As a result, my professional experiences at



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Boarding UN helicopter for fieldwork in Haiti.

the UN have evolved along with the ways I've found to best express my commitment to the ideals laid out in the UN Charter. What this means is that I haven't actually taken the path I thought I would. Alas, I do not currently work at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues on territorial rights and self-determinism. Instead, I found myself working in crisis mapping and participating in inter-agency efforts to share spatial data more effectively in the field during disasters, a project that brought me to Haiti and introduced me to peacekeeping in the field. It turns out that I'm also fascinated with UN reform and the intergovernmental bodies that both stymie and drive change in this organization. This interest resulted in my current post on one of the main committees of the General Assembly, where I primarily focus on peacekeeping and reform initiatives. In short, each project and each new focus I take at the UN requires that I find a tangible, realistic anchor to ground me in the face of what can often seem overwhelming or less than ideal—a lesson not uniquely applicable to the UN but for any idealist working toward substantive social change. ✨

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