The Psychology Coalition at the United Nations, New York

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Co-sponsored by the Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence of the American Psychological Association, the International Association of Applied Psychology, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, the American Psychological Association, the World Council of Psychotherapy, World Federation for Mental Health, the Association for Trauma Outreach and Prevention, and other members of the Psychology Coalition at the United Nations

The Psychology Coalition at the United Nations (UN), composed of scientists, scholars, practitioners and advocates for human rights and social justice, offers enthusiastic support for the commemoration of the United Nations Culture of Peace Day, 14 September 2012, and the International Day of Peace, 21 September 2012. The Psychology Coalition supports UN efforts towards the development of sustainable societies through the prevention of destructive conflict and violence, the empowerment of individuals, and building of cultures of peace and global community. Extensive psychological research and intervention programs demonstrate that psychologists can play a decisive role in achieving peaceful human development and that peaceful cooperation and conflict resolution among individuals, groups and nations is achievable. This research also illustrates how the social psychology of relatedness fosters empathy, support, respect for differences, and nonviolent resolution of conflicting goals. In contrast, divisive disconnection can lead to antipathy, rejection, disrespect, dominance, and hostile competition for resources.

The purpose of this statement is to advocate with governments, UN agencies, civil society organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector and all stakeholders to recognize and utilize the contributions of psychology to the building and preservation of peace, conflict resolution and the reduction and elimination of violence. In the interest of promoting peace through policy, educational, social, political, economic, health and humanitarian uses of psychology, the Psychology Coalition at the UN offers the following recommendations.

1. **Promote Social Cohesion and Connectedness within and between Social Groups.**

   Human beings acquire social identities that create bias in favor of groups to which they belong and devaluation of groups they perceive as different – a process that fosters the formation of stereotypes and prejudice which may lead to conflict and potential violence. Research in the field of psychological science and practice shows that social experiences can be structured in ways that influence people to feel either closer to others or more distant and suspicious. This effect is usually most evident among groups with a strong traditional bond related to a shared religious, ethnic, gender, social or cultural identity, but can develop when heterogeneous groups of mixed ethnicity, religion, genders or cultures come together under conditions of equality to pursue a commonly held ideological or pragmatic purpose. In “real world” situations, these psychological dynamics have been applied toward achieving political and social goals, often for personal or specific group advantage, and to foment war, conquest, and subjugation; but can also be used for beneficent purposes of promoting social cohesion, collaborative achievements, mutual respect for human dignity, peace, and sustainable development.

   Therefore, the Psychology Coalition calls upon all stakeholders to promote peace by integrating proven psychological principles and practices, such as cooperative problem-solving, dialogue, crisis management, peace building and participatory strategies into their programs to foster a greater sense of social connection and cohesion among individuals and groups who might otherwise view each other as opponents, or even enemies. These are promising and underutilized means for defusing intergroup tensions and for building social inclusion and the
common ground necessary for fostering social justice and a culture of peace. Psychologists can be engaged to facilitate training and program design to meet these objectives.

2. **Promote Social Equality, Human Rights, and Social Justice for All**

The Psychology Coalition applauds and supports the current initiative of the UN Human Rights Council and the work of its Advisory Committee, including extensive consultations with various constituencies especially civil society, to develop a comprehensive draft declaration on the human right to peace. Conditions of poverty, deprivation, persecution, humiliation, social inequality, displacement, and forced migration have drastic negative psychological effects on the social identities, psychosocial well-being and mental health, and sense of empowerment of individuals and groups. These effects are known to endure for long periods of time, thereby undermining the development and maintenance of a culture of peace. A key function of any culture is to encode the memories and meanings of its people as a dynamic system that defines societies, their shared values, and the collective meaning of their experiences. Discrimination is among the violations of human rights and human dignity, which are deeply encoded in cultures in such a way that violations committed even against a few can have a multiplicative impact in the transmission of wounds and scars across many individuals within and across generations. Psychological principles can be used to effectively raise awareness, educate about, and institutionalize human rights, and also to counter impulses and arguments used to justify acts of subjugation, domination, and persecution.

Therefore, the Psychology Coalition urges all stakeholders to use principles resulting from psychological science and practice in their programs to move institutions, groups and societies toward greater equality through social, political and economic inclusion of everyone within a shared culture of peace.

3. **Ensure that Psychosocial Wellbeing and Mental Health are treated as Human Rights**

Human rights standards and outcome documents of UN world conferences are increasingly recognizing psychosocial well-being and mental health as basic human rights. Psychological literature confirms that maltreatment ranging from childhood abuse and deprivation to rape, torture, war, and poverty inflicts deep and persistent psychological and mental health wounds that cause suffering throughout the lifespan and across generations, thereby detracting from peace within individuals, families, and societies. Psychological research further affirms the WHO inclusion of mental health as a crucial factor in overall health, defined as a “state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.” Yet, in much of the world, mental health problems are stigmatized as signs of personal, familial and group weakness and thus are often inaccessible to efforts to prevent further social injury and deprivation. In addition, mental health services are scant in comparison to needs and are not as highly valued and supported as physical health services.

Therefore, the Psychology Coalition supports the recently launched WHO Quality Rights Campaign and recommends that all stakeholders, including the humanitarian community, ensure that mental healthcare is held to a high standard, equivalent to physical healthcare, in terms of social and financial support, and that mental healthcare is made accessible to all sectors of society, including children, women and those who are marginalized, disadvantaged and disenfranchised as a requirement of human rights and social justice.

4. **Support Conflict Resolution Approaches and Programs.**

Considerable psychological research in the field of conflict resolution has shown that it is possible to create more peaceful co-existence between groups of diverse backgrounds and cultures. Various principles include understanding the ethos of conflict, collective memories, the nature of identity, and the “contact hypothesis” which maintains that hate dissipates when people come together to work on a common project or goal. Many programs and strategies have been developed to apply conflict resolution principles, with positive results in a number of contexts in replacing prejudice with tolerance and acceptance, and promoting mutual understanding and
constructive cooperation. Conflict resolution programs include, but are not limited to, educational programs, dialogues, encounter models, compassionate listening, nonviolent communication, cooperative problem solving, reconciliation and forgiveness, and open space technology.

Therefore, the Psychology Coalition encourages all stakeholders to become aware of these principles of conflict resolution and of the programs that can achieve this goal if effectively applied at all levels of organizations or groups, in cases of conflict and also, proactively, to prevent conflict from arising.

5. Protect Children and Vulnerable Groups from Exposure to Violence and other Adverse Events

Psychological science shows that children exposed to violence, war, natural disasters and other traumas are at elevated risk for enduring social, educational, physical, and psychological impairments to their wellbeing and social and emotional development. Additionally, they are vulnerable to repeating patterns of violence and are likely to live shorter lives. These risks apply to all marginalized and vulnerable groups. While resilience by some individuals can mitigate such outcomes, psychological and public health studies of large population samples warn of negative and long-term impacts across the lifespan.

With regard to children, the Psychology Coalition applauds the UN study on Violence Against Children and its worldwide report (2006). We further applaud the extensive work of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children with governments, UN agencies, and civil society organizations to institute policies and programs for the prevention of all forms of violence against children. Violence maintains a culture of violence instead of a culture of peace. Therefore, the Psychology Coalition urges all stakeholders to continue to raise this issue regarding the pernicious and pervasive effects of violence against children to the highest priority level, and with urgency comparable to that afforded the prevention of diseases of childhood.

The Psychology Coalition further urges all stakeholders to support policies and programs that help children and marginalized and vulnerable groups recover from violence, war, natural disasters and other traumas, as well as provide protection from and prevention of such outcomes. Emphasis should be placed on “primary” prevention (i.e., prevention of initial inflictions of injury) and “secondary” prevention (i.e. prevention of subsequent exposures or other events that could exacerbate injury). Such efforts should be extended to those directly affected and those in the general population who may be overlooked.

References

Contacts:
Gilbert Reyes, Ph.D., President of The Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence. Email: greyes@fielding.edu
Corann Okorodudu, Chair of the Psychology Coalition at the UN, UN/NGO Representative of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues Email: okorodudu@rowan.edu.
Judy Kuriansky, Vice Chair of the Psychology Coalition at the UN, Main UN/NGO Representative of the International Association of Applied Psychology. Email: DrJudyK@aol.com.
Mary O’Neill Berry, Advocacy Committee of the Psychology Coalition at the UN, UN/NGO Representative of the International Association of Applied Psychology. Email: mberry@sirota.com