

ALTRUSA AT THE UNITED NATIONS

Often when people learn that I represent Altrusa International, Inc., at the United Nations, they ask, “Does the UN really do any good?” I know when people pose that question, they are thinking about wars and armed conflicts that never seem to end, but my answer is still an unequivocal, “YES!”

On October 24, 1945, the United Nations was formally established when a majority of the founding member states ratified a treaty setting up the organization. That was barely two months after the end of World War II, and it has now expanded to 192 member states. The UN cannot stop countries from open conflict if that is the only way those countries can see to end their disputes. But it does provide a forum for them to talk, find arbitration, work out plans by which they can avoid war.

The UN is like a large family, in fact, they often refer to themselves as “the UN family.” I know of no families that do not suffer from arguments, disagreements and conflicts. Certainly, my own does, but when there is a crisis, we close ranks and forget our differences, as the UN seems to do in times of international disasters and crises.

The relevance of the UN remains as pertinent today as it did then. Its work in the field has come into greater focus, especially, in the area of humanitarian relief, peacekeeping and peace building. Its various agencies, such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), UNICEF, UNIFEM, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) provide immediate on-ground relief in times of disasters such as the earthquakes and Tsunamis.

UNDP’s four major fields of concentration are energy development, crisis prevention, governance, and poverty reduction. They also implement the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). UNDP provided assistance to Pakistan to restore local infrastructure and governance system during the 2005 earthquake, and institutional support to their National Disaster Management Authority. FAO dealt with emergency projects in earthquake-affected areas of Pakistan’s federally-administered Tribal Areas, and on the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan to reduce the long-term vulnerability of people in disaster-affected areas.

In post-conflict areas, such as Liberia, a country that suffered 14 years of civil war, which resulted in emergencies that required humanitarian relief, disarmament and demobilization, the UN with the help of NGOs on ground provided 90% of basic services, especially, health services, water and sanitation facilities and road maintenance. In times of natural disasters, internal strife, revolutions, and armed conflicts, displaced persons migrate out of necessity to other countries, often straining the resources of those host countries that, in turn, apply to the various UN agencies for help.

There is no question in my mind that the United Nations is as relevant today, as it was sixty-three years ago.

Audrey Braver