

We Must Hear the Unheard for a More Stable World

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Powerful and affluent countries usually get their way because they are powerful and affluent. But that is only part of the story. They also dominate international decision-making because the world of diplomacy is skewed in their favour. I have seen this diplomatic imbalance from both sides of the table – the strong and the weak – and it serves the interests of neither.

As a British diplomat at the United Nations Security Council up to mid-2002, I had substantial advantages. With reams of telegrams and intelligence reports (I covered the Middle East), I was better briefed than most other diplomats present. Our mission was among the largest at the UN, with squads of diplomats covering every issue. In negotiation, our experienced lawyers could ensure that any textual changes were turned to our benefit. We could consult our capital in real-time without fear of interception: unlike many others around the table, our communications were secure.

Such advantages are available to a handful of the world's most powerful countries – China, the US, Russia, France, Britain. By no coincidence, their real power (economic and military) is multiplied by this less-recognised but nonetheless forceful diplomatic power.

Now working on the other side of the table, with governments such as that of Kosovo or the people of Western Sahara, I see the opposite picture. Perhaps it is no surprise to some that poor and inexperienced governments are at a massive disadvantage in diplomacy. At the World Trade Organisation in Geneva for instance, many poor countries cannot afford to maintain missions, let alone the experts they need to track and influence highly complex trade negotiations. In New York, the numerous smaller UN missions struggle to cover the enormous and proliferating agendas of the UN General Assembly, Security Council and specialised committees with just one or two horribly overworked and under-equipped diplomats.

Often those with most at stake are not even allowed into the room where their affairs are being discussed. In the misnamed “open” or “public” sessions discussing Kosovo at the UN Security Council, for example, Serbia, Russia and even Mauritania can speak, but Kosovo, as it is not a state, cannot. This imbalance of course does not serve those marginalised but nor, paradoxically, does it serve the powerful.

Traditionalists may sneer that it is too difficult or simply too anarchic to open the doors of diplomacy to more participants. But in this era of globalisation, agreements that fail to take into account the interests of all concerned parties are not good or sustainable and, too

often, they fall apart. The ultimate effect is a less stable world. If people are ignored, they tend to find ways – sometimes violent – to get heard.

The closed world of international diplomacy must devise ways to hear the unheard. During the years of international sanctions on Iraq, we on the UK (and US) side could have paid more heed to the many aid organisations and informal Iraqi groups who warned us about the damaging impact of sanctions; today Iraq is still paying the price for that indifference. In preparing for the post-invasion political future, planners should have consulted a wider range of groups than Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress or the Kurds, who were wrongly assumed as representative of all of Iraq's "opposition". In negotiations on Kosovo's status, not only should the Kosovo government be given a hearing but so should groups including Kosovo's Serbs and other minorities, whose interests are not necessarily represented by Serbia's government in Belgrade. Greater inclusiveness need not mean chaos: it is not difficult to discern which non-state groups are genuinely representative of legitimate concerns, and which are not.

What can be done? For a start, multilateral bodies such as the UN, European Union and WTO could make their meetings more transparent, posting detailed briefings on agendas and issues under discussion (a new non-government organisation called the Security Council Report is showing how in New York). More public information about key officials would help too, as would more deliberate policies of consultation.

Of course, this is all about power. Governments think that by meeting in secret and excluding dissonant voices they will more easily get what they want – but they often end up with the opposite. To really get your way and sustain it, in diplomacy as in life, you have to include, not exclude. It is harder work at first, but ultimately, the result would be a more stable world.

The writer, a former British diplomat, is founder and director of Independent Diplomat, a non-profit diplomatic advisory group

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