Trying It on for Size: Design and International Public Policy

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Before we begin, we should note that we are not here speaking on behalf of either the United Nations (UN) generally or the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) specifically. As researchers at UNIDIR, we are afforded both a valuable space to generate ideas for the improvement of UN operations or practices, and a chance to look and comment upon its performance with an interest in doing so. If at any point we seem less than fully impressed by UN conduct, you should think of our comments less as criticism and more as … tough love.

This event is quite exciting for us. It is the first time that we have had the opportunity to talk about design to a room full of actual designers and people concerned with design questions. Normally, the people that we talk to about program design are diplomats, practitioners in security, development, or humanitarian action, academic researchers, or field staff of the United Nations.

The response we often get, when speaking of design, is akin to the look one makes when handed unfamiliar food: alternatively respectful, skeptical, or suspicious, and sometimes a bit put off.

Yet, we speak about it often, and we think about it even more. The reason is that we think design looks promising for addressing some of the challenges faced in the international public policy domains of security, development, and humanitarian action. And we now believe that a new agenda needs to be formed around the investigation of the capabilities and limitations of design as a tool for public policy.

This event is also a bit intimidating for us precisely *because* it is the first time we have had a chance to talk to a room full of designers. In many of our lectures, we argue for the benefits of design processes and techniques. We advocate for the conceptual and procedural value of design space at the nexus between defining problems and taking programmatic action. But ultimately, we need to learn from designers, from you, whether our suspicions about the power of collaboration here may prove as fruitful as we suspect.

In international public policy, design is the dark space between knowledge and action. It is where the murky terms, metaphors, and conventional wisdom lurk that are often antagonistic to design as a professional activity. Design, after all, requires a

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certain humility before a problem—a respect for the challenge and complexity being faced, and a willingness to engage that problem on its own terms before rushing to action. This patience and humility are not often the qualities found in international public policy, where civil servants too often treat their work mechanically and fulfil policy with known treatments. These tendencies suppress the curiosity needed to imagine new possibilities—to innovate, to solve.

In that liminal zone between knowledge and action, we hear phrases repeated, such as "aren't we doing that already?" "We already know what the public needs," "We already had a brainstorming session on that," or this, the phrase to usher in the end of days, "It's all very political."

So in these comments, think of us as two people coming to design from a place outside it—namely, from work in empirical, qualitative research on security and international public policy, on the one hand, and, on the other, from the perspective of policy practitioners engaged with the international policy and programming community. We are therefore coming to design in the hopes of supporting a potential resource in bringing knowledge to action.

Although we are both quite new to design as a field (we have only started to learn about it, and our interest grows daily), we're not actually new to design as a process. As academics, we have a lot of experience with research design. As UN research staff, we have a good deal of experience with project design. Both of these tasks require a lot of pencil chewing and staring at white boards. We ask many of the same kinds of questions that designers ask, and the one question that probably sums them all up is this: how do we get from here to there?

If designers and international public policy professionals are going to work together, we need some common agenda to serve as a platform from which to proceed. A productive place to begin is to find out where we are right now. In that spirit, we begin by telling you how our team at UNIDIR got here so that, together, we might find a way to continue this journey forward as a community. This community we form exists as a function of common questions we share; it possesses a similar sense of wonder about the fit of design into public policy generally, and it wants to bring its different skills together so that we might do some good.

How We Got Here

In 2003 we came to the UNIDR with a project idea called the Security Needs Assessment Protocol (SNAP). We started with the observation that many security-related programs run by the UN were either unsuccessful or at least far from optimal. "Programs" here refers to distinct, community-level sets of activities that UN operational agencies had been undertaking to try to prevent conflict, manage violent crises, or build peace and stability in post-conflict societies.

The types of programs involved in such work varies, but to illustrate, such projects include voluntary weapons collection programs after wars, demining both to reduce casualties and to stimulate economic recovery, creating public awareness programs to explain new state laws or policies, and building new mechanisms for reporting on crime or state abuses. The list goes on, and it is a long one.

It was our observation that one of the key reasons for the failure or sub-standard performance of many of these programs was lack of local knowledge. The term, "local knowledge," was coined by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz,[2] who explained that the purpose of anthropology, as he understood and practiced it, was to "determine what this people or that take to be the point of what they are doing." In other words, it was to come to "understanding of understandings not our own."

The UN is not centrally involved in that activity. And while we are not calling for UN operational agencies to become departments of anthropology, we do wish to force the foundational and consequential point that, as an institution, the UN is trying to carry out some rather complex social activities in places where we have a less than stellar understanding as to how people live, what they might need to contribute to those lives, and what the local people might take to be *our* point in being there. We are not overstating the point to say that this knowledge is a matter of life and death and that designing more appropriate local action is the nexus of practice between knowledge and action itself. It can make the difference between success and failure in international public policy.

With the highest stakes in mind, our team at the SNAP project spent about a year looking through more than 100 assessment tools and design processes within the UN—on topics as broad as mine action to livelihood assistance—trying to understand the conceptual and procedural basis from which goals are turned into sets of local actions. We concluded that not a single agency was taking cultural matters seriously in their design of programs, and this was a major problem. The essence of that problem is that the agencies have no comparative basis upon which to determine—or even suspect—whether one course of action, in a particular locale, is better than another. After all, some tabled design options are bad ones. Discovering them is part of the process, but in separating the wheat from the chafe, one needs some basis to make certain claims about the value of action.

The argument we are making about using local knowledge to design local action is neither an ideological one about people having a right to be heard, nor an attempt to democratize the process of participation as some kind of inherent good. Rather, our argument is a decidedly pragmatic one.

2 Clifford Geertz, Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology (USA: Basic Books, 1983).

It was a point expressed perfectly by Dr. Roz Lasker, a member of our advisory group, when she testified at a U.S. Congressional Briefing on Rational Homeland Security in 2007 and explained that "we need to learn from the public before we can protect the public."[3]

In short—and as we think you'd agree—a deep understanding of your client, beneficiary, or constituency, is absolutely essential if your design is going to be successful (at least from the users' point of view). But while "participatory approaches" are broadly employed by the UN working in communities (with varying degrees of skill and success), unfortunately, the notion of design as a tool to create value in services remains quite alien to the UN system and to international public policy in general. This "blind spot" around design rather prejudices the system against both research and design, and fails to make space for the complex interplay between the two.

Whereas design appears to both encourage and necessitate the deep understanding of your client, the achievement of public policy, perhaps ironically, does not. Whereas a designer sits between the problem and the solution and makes use of that moment of wonder to imagine innovative means of bringing a new solution into being, the policy practitioner is less a designer than a civil servant. That person selects the proper course of conduct from existing policy. The service being provided therefore serves the end user to a lesser degree than it serves the makers of the policy. There is, in fact, good reason for this imbalance, which is that the policy's legitimacy is reposed on a political philosophy of democracy and representation. In effect, policy is a product of democracy, and serving policies is therefore serving the democratic ideal.

The designer and the policy practitioner therefore sit at the same nexus between problem and action, but they treat it in different ways. We would like to suggest that both are entirely reasonable and understandable treatments of their challenges. However, they are different paradigms, and each makes possible different forms of action in the service of their master. For simplicity, we might say that the designer is looking down to an individual user, whereas the civil servant is looking up to the entire voting public and the expression of its communal will through the policy apparatus.

This observation means challenging one paradigm of work with another, which calls for a great deal of reconceptualization of existing systems at the level of government, international organizations, and others who work through policy and mandate systems to craft local action.

On the basis of this observation about the interplay between these two paradigms at the very juncture of design, we have arrived at two agenda items in need of attention, for the UN specifically and for international public policy more generally, as a means of achieving greater effectiveness. The first agenda item is *the generation of local knowledge relevant to programming in the fulfilment of public*

3 Roz D. Lasker, Statement at the "Congressional Briefing on Rational Homeland Security: Lowering Obstacles and Creating Economically and Socially Sensible Policies," September 2007, http://www.redefiningreadiness.net/pdf/RDL91907.pdf (accessed 2/3/2011).

policy, and the second is *the application of local knowledge to those programming processes.*

In identifying these agenda items, we recognized that they present a need for new kinds of social knowledge to apply to problems on peace and security. But we also saw that the knowledge produced will not apply itself. One needs to be serious and attentive to both the knowledge and its application to craft viable and effective solutions.

When the SNAP project began formally at the end of 2006, with the financial backing of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we initially focused our attention on the first part of the problem: namely, the generation of local knowledge.

We worked hard with a stellar group of international advisors on aligning tools and techniques from the academy to the kind of constraints faced within a UN operational context.[4] Internal constraints include matters such as timing, staffing, money, political pressure, and rules and regulations; external constraints, not usually confronted in academic research, include carrying out work in places with explosive remnants of war, improvised explosive devices, widespread small arms availability, hostile government forces, fatal traffic systems, terrorism, and abductions. We asked ourselves such questions as:

- How can we generate rigorous cultural knowledge related to problems of security that would be of use to programming?
- How can this be done rapidly?
- How can this be done ethically?
- How can this be done safely for all of those involved?

With these and additional questions and constraints well in mind, we put together field teams, and then off we went to make some rather concerted efforts to generate security needs assessments for the United Nations in both Northern Ghana, which was coping with an unresolved inter-tribal conflict at the time, and southern Nepal, which is now recovering from a civil war and facing massive political instability. Having returned from the field just recently, we're actually still involved in the post-field analysis from our work in Nepal.

What we now know is that to improve local level programming with local knowledge, you need two additional and crucial elements. The first is a mechanism for applying knowledge to action. Said differently, you need to take the design juncture very seriously, and a *way* to do so, to create processes that systematically bring local knowledge to action through the use of relevant design processes, practices, or techniques in a responsible manner.

The second thing you need is a client who wants this locally informed programming to happen. As of today, the UN operational agencies—from UNICEF to the Department for Peacekeeping

4 The SNAP Advisory Group consisted of Mike Agar, Ron Scollon, Gerry Philipsen, Donal Carbaugh, Tamar Katriel, Kwesi Yankah, Randolph Kent, Rom Harré, Michael Berry, Wendy Cukier, Fathali Moghaddam, and Roz Lasker.

Operations, to the UN Development Programme—have yet to be brought fully into the kind of processes that characterize the way design junctures are faced in other professional sectors. They remain in the civil servant paradigm of program designers. Although interest is slowly building, particularly among high-level people in the UN system who are both receptive to new ideas and possibly a bit exhausted by old ones, we have nevertheless not yet reached the tipping point.

Many agencies, especially in development and humanitarian work, undoubtedly see "participation" from local communities as being important to programming. However, on the research side, they do not differentiate between local opinion and local knowledge, which has an important effect on the kinds of research in which they engage, the kinds of knowledge that becomes available for use, and the things that can or cannot be accomplished with it. In this way, and in our view, "participation" edges out "understanding" in the Geertzian sense we spoke of earlier. Further, the agencies we have worked with do not see the need for design to be taken seriously as a means to increase the effectiveness of local action.

So where does that bring us? Frankly, we come to a juncture that can be a bit disheartening. Plenty remains to be done to see our vision for the SNAP project realized—that is, of bringing locally informed program and policy design to matters of community security and development. We need to generate the supply of local knowledge relevant to programming, which means stimulating and encouraging the academic community to direct their best and brightest to new questions for new purposes. We need to continue to adapt or develop techniques for generating such knowledge suited to the types of conditions and constraints already identified, and we need to create mechanisms for the application of knowledge into design processes by building bridges with the design community. We need to learn from each other so that we can find ways to fit design into public policy in tutored, wise, and instructed ways. And we *also* need to create the demand from governments, international organizations, and operational agencies for better designs to bring about more viable, cooperative, and responsible local action.

In short, we face a challenging task. But the energy is building to take that task on, and exciting things are starting to happen. Let's take a moment, then, to see where we now stand.

Where We Are Now

The SNAP team started discussing design and planning in the context of programming as early as 2003. But back then, we were thinking about design in the very limited way managers think of design in project cycles. Not until early in 2008—when we started talking seriously with Lavrans Løvlie at live | work based in London and Oslo—did we start to think about design research, design thinking, and service design. But once we started, we haven't turned back.

In taking up the lens of design thinking, certain general trends within the policy community were brought into view for us. Three in particular are worth mentioning:

1. Design junctures are either unrecognized or typically skipped over.

In trying to create the SNAP project as a "program design service" for operational agencies working in security, development, and humanitarian action, we have often found it difficult to explain both why such a service is needed, and how it can help get things done.

One of the reasons for this difficulty is that agencies often move directly from identifying problems to planning programs of action, without ever recognizing that they have reached a design juncture and that they therefore could benefit from a program design service such as SNAP.

We think of design junctures as moments when problems have been defined and decision makers are effectively provided an opportunity to either enter into a design phase or go directly to planning. In most cases, we find that agencies go directly to planning without ever having noticed that a design opportunity has actually been missed.

2. When design junctures are recognized, they are not attended to with design expertise.

For us, meeting design junctures with design expertise means first choosing to enter a design process and then deliberately creating design space. We view design space as being the measurable allocation of resources toward processes dedicated to the creation of solutions. These resources vary with context but usually include time, money, attention, people, and expertise.

Next, it means using tutored approaches to the creation of designs in the context and constraints of that space. One of the most exciting things about the field of design is that it offers a number of highly generative techniques for tabling various options to solving problems, working them through, and testing them out. There are frameworks to help guide these processes, and skills to employ in doing so.

In the particular case of public policy, in which there are ethical and moral consequences, it means the use of sound, valid, and reliable scientific knowledge, carefully applied that design space so that the design techniques result in the crafting of new solutions for social action.

If design junctures are not attended to in this way, how are they attended to?

The short answer is this: politically. This characterization could sound cynical, but we don't mean it that way. If civil servants are intended to serve the civic good, it only stands to reason that the determination of the civic good becomes a necessary task. What ends

up substituting for design as a professional practice, then, becomes what Bismarck famously called the art of the possible. Ultimately, all action in security and development is certainly subject to some political debate, so that solutions will always be subject to some artful agreement.

But we have to remember a simple fact: what is politically viable may also be utterly impossible. A group of people, after all, can agree to anything. When you try to get things done in the world, however, those smiles of self-satisfaction tend to droop.

The reason is that political agreement is the art of managing discursive and rhetorical space. It requires the manipulation of shared premises and common symbolic systems to craft a common view. But in the end, the product of that space must be subject to fulfillment in the real world. So even if we all agree that it would be wise to build a ladder to Heaven, at some point, terrestrial realities are going to force us to recognize that our designs are coming up a little short.

When we design action from evidence, rather than from mere agreement alone, we significantly challenge the presumption that political agreement—independent of evidence—is enough to constitute legitimate grounds for action. From this position of challenging the old presumptions, we find powerful motivation for moving forward.

Determining the parameters of the possible, when design is not explicitly used, inevitably becomes an intuitive task. Here, solutions are not informed explicitly by science, by local knowledge, or by prototyping. They are determined by instinctively reading and balancing competing interests among political parties or actors and then trying to advance solutions within given policy frameworks, within tight time horizons, with limited staff and limited data, and often among people who will likely disapprove of whatever is offered up, however reasonable. People who become good at this intuitive process of both analysis and decision-making in a particular professional realm are called "seasoned professionals." At some point—often based on success or failure—seasoned can even evolve into wise.

Doing things this way is actually fine up to a point, but that point is quickly reached when our intuitive analyses and design have moral consequences for others. At that juncture, a formal process of design is not only a pragmatic activity to crafting solutions but actually an ethical imperative given the consequences of our conduct.

All this invites an exciting question: What is the relationship between the art of the possible and the professional skills of design? Or put differently, does design extend the possibilities of the art of the possible in public policy?

3. The tides are turning

Our third observation is more upbeat: it is that the tides are turning. What we are beginning to see all around us—at the UN, at the World Bank, in national capitals, in research centers and universities, and in field offices—is that new opportunities for creating design space at the nexus between knowledge and action are in fact opening up. When we say "opening up," we don't mean they are naturally spreading apart like rose pedals after a spring rain. We mean to imply, rather, that if you wedge a crowbar between problems and planning and exert enough force, you can just about make space for the idea of design to slip in past bureaucratic defenses to make some kind of furtive trouble. And this is happening.[5]

We can't say why this opportunity is happening, although we like to believe our work at UNIDIR is playing a small part. We suspect, however, that a global confluence of factors are in play right now that encourage this notion of design to actually gain some purchase. These factors all converge on a rather simple but widely noticed fact: a lot of very expensive things are not working very well. For example, in passing, you may be familiar with:

- The global economy
- The war in Iraq
- The war in Afghanistan
- The Millennium Development Goals

Together, these constitute trillions of dollars either wasted, badly managed, or simply gone, and this reality is a fact completely independent of one's political views on these endeavours. Whether for or against the war in Afghanistan or the Millennium Development Goals, you cannot currently be fully satisfied with the designs used to spend your taxes—that is, if you can find the designs at all.

Governments—and even actual tax-paying citizens—are getting a bit perturbed over the cost of incompetence. Best practices of the types that PricewaterhouseCoopers uses to determine best administrative practices, or the kinds that the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations is using to tighten its operational conduct, can indeed help raise an organization up from chaos to order when the situations being faced, time and again, are essentially the same. But in the face of diversity, uniqueness, and cultural variation, they can never help an organization innovate on the front lines of creativity or intellectual rigor.

The reason is straightforward: in many cases, especially where social worlds are concerned, the reason that best practices don't work is because no practice is universally best. Therefore, what we need to do in such cases is move from best practices to a best process approach. And that best process approach is going to need the support of researchers, designers, and policy practitioners.

It is going to need you.

5 On November 23, 2009, UNIDIR co-hosted a workshop with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and the Institute Clingendael in The Hague on *Strategic Design in Public Policy: Revisiting the Knowledge-to-action Nexus.* That event has produced a joint statement on the value of design in public policy that may serve as a useful reference point for further development.

Where We Go from Here

In cooperation with a range of dedicated and creative people, we are using our opportunities at UNIDIR to bring three domains of work to a new agenda on international public policy. We call it Strategic Design in Public Policy.[6]

Although subject to some later refinement, we now define strategic design as the systematic and deliberate practice of applying conceptual, empirical, and technical knowledge to the design of social actions to help achieve a desired goal. Our attention is firmly on matters of public importance and on international security, development, and humanitarian action in particular.

Engaging in strategic design requires expertise across a range of disciplines. It requires expertise in empirical research, including often-neglected interpretive, qualitative research grounded in empirical methods. It requires expertise in design, with its attention to divergent questions, recognizing and using design junctures and design space, prototyping, imagining worlds of possibility, and bringing them into being. And it requires policy experience so that design options can be considered against the international superstructures of, for example, international public law, international humanitarian law, and human rights law, national policies, politically binding international agreements, bi-lateral and multi-lateral relations, codes of ethics, doctrine, mandated policy, and a host of other constraining factors on design possibilities in that context.

To realize the potential of strategic design requires developments in each of these three domains of work—research, design, and policy—as well as new forms of cooperation among them. It requires that strategic design teams be formed to face challenging but worthwhile endeavors. This agenda holds out promise for cooperative talents to start to work toward some shared goals, and in the coming years, we will be working hard to advance that agenda—we hope with ever-increasing support.

What are the elements of the strategic design agenda that needs to be built? Think of this question as an invitation to conversation. To start off, we offer some questions we've considered that only you, as designers, can answer.

If strategic design, as we have defined it, offers a frame for thinking about design in the context of research on the one hand, and international public policy action on the other, then we see three key areas for reflection for the design community itself:

1. What capabilities for, or limitations to, the application of research on social or natural phenomena does design training provide?
2. What are the techniques of design that might be applicable to designing new forms of social action?
3. What skills can designers bring to the crafting of new programmatic solutions that are characterized by the kinds

6 In June, 2010, UNIDIR co-hosted the Conference on Strategic Design and Public Policy in Glen Cove, New York, with the Said Business School at the University of Oxford, and the Center for Local Strategies Research of the University of Washington. The conference report can be found at http://www.unidir.org/bdd/fiche-active.php?ref_active=337 (accessed 2/3/2011) and also at https://sites.google.com/site/strategicdesignandpublicpolicy/home (accessed 2/3/2011).

of ethical, legal, organizational, procedural, and political constraints that define the strategic design space?

Addressing these three questions helps to identify the limits of design at present, and in doing so, helps identify some new frontiers. It also invites us to ask a new set of questions:

1. What kinds of challenges exist for the application of knowledge, especially empirical knowledge, to design processes?
2. What kinds of collaboration does this conclusion invite?
3. What means of collaboration might exist?
4. What means of collaboration might be created?

We believe that innovation and design have a crucial role to play in creating solutions to our most pressing problems. We also believe that for this approach to fulfill its potential, we need to find ways of bringing the domains of research, design, and policy together in tutored, reflective, and intentional ways. Done well, this cooperative effort could have lasting effects in many areas. It might help move us, in the final assessment, beyond the mere art of the possible in international public policy and a little closer to the possibilities of design.