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UN Public Service Awards: Some Comments

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It is difficult to argue with the concept and philosophy of the UN Public Service Awards. The question perhaps is why this has not been done earlier. Government-bashing exists because we mainly hear of the things that have not been done. The things that have been done –and done well—have rarely been held up for scrutiny or approval. They form part of what is routinely dismissed as things public servants should do any way, of things that public servants are paid for. But there are other reasons for the award.

Public servants are usually paid lower than their counterparts in the private sector. It will do much to their self-esteem to be given a pat on the back so that even when their real incomes remain at a standstill, their psychic income gets a boost from recognition. An international award extends the affirmation process significantly. People in other places learn about the award and know that somewhere, despite meager resources and all the kinds of constraints that governments are heir to, someone or some institutions has beaten the odds and done a wonderful thing. Not only does this multiply the person's psychic income; it multiplies national pride as well.

I can think of a number of things that might add to the value of the award.

In many places, innovation and excellence in governance may be a function of resources, whether human or capital. In the absence of segregation across development levels (which, in the long run, may be good to consider), it would be good to recognize the degree of difficulty it took to get a certain innovation implemented. For instance, a massive inoculation or vaccination program may be easy for a developed economy to achieve but would take considerable effort for fledgling states. Where you have the same innovation undertaken by two countries with similar results, it would be nice to recognize the country with significant more difficulties to hurdle. The poorer one is, the more difficult it is to get things done. Even when the results are not similar, the impact on a poorer country is higher than would be expected in an economy that is much better off. The inspirational value is also higher because other similarly poorer countries now know that there is room for replicating under their resource-challenged situations.

Inspirational value is also enhanced when there are local awarding ceremonies that are given wide coverage in the home country. While this may be met with some degree of indifference in countries where the same interventions can be routinely done, local awarding that is covered by media will certainly do a lot for national pride when this requires some measure of sacrifice from the local communities.

It is easy, of course, to submit a well-written and well documented innovation or excellence example. Again, experience in documentation and presentation may be a function of resource availability. May we ask for validation and verification exercises from the local UN or UNDP persons or even retired UN or UNDP employees in the countries that submitted the nominations. That way, we are certain that the examples we recognize are valid, credible and will not be an embarrassment to us.

Finally, a crystal trophy is nice but assistance is even more welcome. In many countries, the locus of intervention is usually limited because of resource problems. May the award also include UN assistance for propagating the award over a wider area. There are many UN or UNDP projects all over the world. May we endorse funding the propagation of winning awards in the same country or in others with similar conditions. If the UN believes in these awards, it should believe in it enough so that more and more people can avail of its benefits, because its application is replicable in many areas and the resource constraints may, in the short run, be bridged by technical or resource assistance from the UN itself.

These recommendations are submitted in the hope that the awards will be more valid and less prone to the availability of resources that many struggling countries severely lack.