



Q&A

"We Live in a Complicated World in Transition"

Anna Shen interviews JEAN-CHRISTOPHE BAS, Senior Advisor for Strategic Development and Partnerships at the UN Alliance of Civilizations (AOC)



Jean-Christophe Bas (Credit UN Photo)

UNITED NATIONS, May 21 (IPS) - Fresh from a midnight arrival from Intuit's headquarters in California's Silicon Valley, Jean-Christophe Bas has just participated in the launch of a campaign to promote global inclusion, under the auspices of the U.N. Alliance of Civilizations (AOC) and the U.N. Scientific, Educational and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and in advance of the World Day for Cultural Diversity on May 21.

A long roster of global companies are involved - Cisco, Yahoo, McAfee, American Airlines, Kellogg's, Intuit, Marriott – along with hundreds of civil society organisations.

The head of AOC's strategic development and partnerships, Bas spoke to IPS correspondent Anna Shen about the private sector's involvement, why this is only just the beginning of what he sees as an enormous global movement, and his vision for this Day to become as big as Earth Day.

Q: Why are these partnerships key to the success of inclusion?

A: Such multi-stakeholder partnerships are very important; living and communicating together across cultural differences is not always simple. The corporate sector has extensive experience in dealing with cultural diversity, at the workforce level and in the market where they operate. As business has gone global over the past few decades, its role in spreading values has gained importance.

This year, [World Diversity Day](#) will be celebrated with a huge mobilisation of people from around the world. This is the beginning of a long journey and it will expand year after year, with more and more people expressing publicly that they care for diversity, that they are willing to be engaged and involved and responsible. This will also hopefully contribute to a public debate on how to live together in our complex and diverse modern societies.

Our goal is to reach out and engage people directly, on the same model as Earth Day did. When it began, people had no idea what could be done for climate change. The movement started with the basic switch off the light, or turn off the tap when brushing teeth. The goal is to create an "Earth Day" for diversity inclusion

and make people aware they can contribute a difference. "Do one thing for diversity and inclusion" is the name of our [Facebook page](#), which I urge everyone to join.

Q: What is the importance of this campaign?

A: It is important to raise awareness about cultural differences, beliefs, values, and religions, so that there is a move in people's attitude from fear to curiosity, understanding and cooperation. The goal of this campaign is to create a world constituency that cares for diversity, and people who know and support diversity and consider it is an asset for our societies.

We live in a complicated world in transition. The notions of values, identity, beliefs and cultures are really in flux, and there is a growing kind of fear or concern with the differences.

We have moved from a very ideological world – the east and west – to a world where the defining factor – and often, the dividing factor – is identity. We live in a world where it is increasingly difficult to deal with diversity, and we observe that a growing number of conflicts are rooted in cultural tensions.

In 2009, the Heidelberg Institute reported that out of 108 conflicts around the world, 143 were rooted in tension from cultural differences. This is becoming a very important issue – if you take the migration flows globally, a major trend, there are 250 million migrants globally. When added together, this group would comprise the fifth largest populous country in the world.

This is profoundly changing the nature and the pattern of our societies. For example, 40 percent of the population of Victoria, in Australia, is foreign born.

The same phenomenon of societal mixing goes for Europe, the U.S. and other parts of world. Migration is certainly one if not the major trends of the 21st century, and often results in anxiety.

Q: What can the private sector add to this initiative that the U.N. or international organisations cannot?

A: The corporate sector has been at the forefront in thinking about diversity, because it is vital to their business. There is obviously a transfer of experience that can be organised by doing public- private partnerships. Most global companies have a chief diversity officer who is usually at a senior management level, whose role it is to promote inclusion and diversity. This could be of interest to governments in terms of public policy with, for example a minister of diversity.

Q: How does a lack of inclusion affect development?

A: The lack of inclusion in our societies can harm peace, security and development. Inclusive societies create and unleash the potential of all to contribute to prosperity and stability in development and contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Q: How can social media help to promote the cause?

A: People can feel they can make a difference and share an experience. In that respect our Facebook page, called "Do One Thing for Diversity and Inclusion" constitutes a unique platform. People are sharing what they've been doing and learned from other's experience. The goal is to create a global dynamic of people who share experience and a vision of the world, and discuss the nature of the society in which they want to live.

This world community of cultural diversity supporters will also hopefully advocate for the changes in our education systems needed to prepare the citizen of the 21st century to cope with the challenges of a multicultural society. Today when we are supposed to be in a globally interconnected world, less than two percent of students study abroad. In many countries, the study of foreign languages remains very low.

You cannot understand other cultures if you speak only one language. The same applies for history books, national days and national hymns, which usually don't create any space for looking at other cultures.

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