

February 1, 2008
Conversations at Lunch Speaker
Peter Uvin

Peter Uvin, Academic Dean of the Fletcher School of Diplomacy at Tufts University and recent author of *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda* and of *Human Rights and Development*, spoke about the advantages and challenges of a “human rights-based approach” to development in post-conflict countries. Uvin’s current research is focused particularly in Burundi, a country where the average income is \$680 per year and the life-expectancy is 42. Uvin summarized the common approaches to development in third-world countries, which often consist of pouring money into infrastructure and building projects. These attempts, he said, have not been very sustainable. Uvin proposes that a successful development plan will not be focused only on instituting certain economic or political infrastructure, but will use the goal of human rights as a foundation upon which to develop all other practices.

A human rights focus encompasses economic and political goals of course, but requires that every conversation start with an evaluation of what human rights are being violated and how to effect systematic change. Thus, educational, political, economic, agricultural, and judicial systems are viewed through this “human rights lens” and set up to alleviate specific injustices. To illustrate this approach, Uvin used the example of education, where a typical development approach might focus on building better schools. A “rights-based” development plan instead addresses the underlying inequalities that lead to the lack of education. In Burundi, this type of development plan would examine the way that power is kept within a very small portion of the population: approximately 90% of university students are from the same province, which is, not coincidentally, the same province from which the president comes. Thus, only these select few are able to get good jobs and there is no upward mobility. Uvin’s “rights-based” system focuses on the systematic characteristics which preserve this inequality and then aims to change them.

Uvin spoke passionately about his conversations with villagers on his most recent visit to Burundi. He emphasized the importance of listening to what they want out of a government and learning about their community structure. In fact, it is not a very community-based country; towns have no central square and no local chief. Burundian ideas of human rights are generally articulated on the individual level but are not inherent in their governmental structure. Uvin’s suggestions for creating a lasting concern for human rights as this country emerges from a twelve year civil war include: using the public institutions that already exist instead of imposing new, unfamiliar ones, informing people of the development process and its aims and getting them involved, and “doing things longer rather than shorter ... spend 1 million for 5 years instead of 5 million in 1 year” so that local people can learn to operate a program and effect change on their own over time.