

Investigating UN

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For two of the last three years, my New York-based partner, Alix Freedman, and I have investigated parts of the United Nations. Last year, we wrote a series of stories on how Saddam Hussein, with the tacit help of multinational corporations, profited from U.N. economic sanctions that were meant to punish him. Those stories were a finalist this year for the Pulitzer Prize in international reporting.

In 2000, we wrote “Bottled Up: As UNICEF Battles Baby-Formula Makers, African Infants Sicken,” a seven-month probe of the children’s agency that won three awards. The story explained why, unlike in the West, HIV-infected women in sub-Saharan Africa aren’t told that infant formula is an alternative to breast-feeding that could help protect babies from AIDS.

These stories involved months of painstaking digging to penetrate a highly secretive bureaucracy. While the U.N. employs a small army of p.r. people and issues countless reports, most internal U.N. documents and contracts are treated as confidential.

Here are some tips for investigating the U.N. and its many agencies:

1. **Former employees:** In nearly every investigation I’ve ever done, I’ve found that former employees are often the best sources. They can provide invaluable information, insight and quite often, internal documents. The United Nations has literally thousands of employees, so it’s not very difficult to track down former staffers.
2. **U.N. Missions:** Members U.N. countries maintain “permanent missions” in New York and, in many cases, Geneva for diplomats and other staff (see www.un.int). These people can provide an inside view on U.N. goings-on, and often are freer to talk, usually on background, than U.N. employees. They also may have access to internal U.N. records. We’ve found it’s best to contact as many missions as possible as it’s often surprising—despite their public postures—which ones are willing to cooperate, and which ones aren’t, on particular issues.
3. **Internet:** The U.N., beginning with www.un.org, runs an extensive, multi-lingual web site for its agencies, and includes many reports, press releases, statistical information, etc. It’s an excellent starting point. To track down former employees who live in the U.S., www.infospace.com is useful, as well as, of course, Google are valuable tools.
4. **Interviews:** Face time is always preferable to phone interviews for virtually any story, but is especially so when it comes to the U.N. Despite the existence of countless p.r. people, many agencies will allow employees to be interviewed, often without a minder present. It’s also usually possible to telephone employees directly and either interview them on the phone or set up meeting. Face time allows you to gain people’s trust and also helps when, for example, English isn’t a person’s first language.