

Tax Research

The UN

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The UN is a strange organisation. The US by and large hates it. But if you say in conversation to anyone that you're going there, then there is a sort of hushed awe.

I'm not sure that either sentiment is justified, and I write that as I am sitting having coffee in the Palais de Nations in Geneva, the UN's European HQ. I guess both reactions are based in part on a misconception. The US believes that the UN is nascent world government and so threatens the isolation to which it believes it can always retreat (but shows no inclination toward). Those who do not know much of it think that if you're at the UN it is either because you're engaged in grand diplomacy or something rather virtuous.

I'd sometimes like to think I was virtuous, but the impression is hard to sustain, especially when I'm here for something as earthly as a meeting of an Intergovernmental Working Group of Experts on International Standards of Accounting and Reporting. The agenda would not excite most people, but equally it may be reassuring to accountants worldwide that issues such as SME (small and medium sized entity) reporting are on the agenda this morning. That's my old stomping ground, and if I can I will make a contribution. My real reason for being here starts this afternoon. The conference turns to the issue of reporting indicators on corporate responsibility.

This issue is of course important to the Tax Justice Network, for whom I usually attend UN meetings, but it's just as important to the Publish What You Pay coalition and its members, for whom I am here today. I recently blogged (and sorry, from where I am I can't provide the links, but please search Publish What You Pay on this site and you'll find it) on the work PWYP has done in calling for an International Financial Reporting Standard that would require accounting for turnover, costs, profit and taxes paid on a country-by-country basis. The International Accounting Standards Board has accepted that there is a viable argument for this, now it's time to present it to the UN.

There are things I thought accountancy would never do for me. Being here is one of them. It pays to be open minded is the only lesson I can draw from that.

Richard Murphy.