

# The United Nations and Civil Society: The Role of NGOs

## Report of the Thirtieth United Nations Issues Conference

Sponsored by

[The Stanley Foundation](#)

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### Executive Summary

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Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are more involved than ever before in global policymaking. The nature of their involvement will most likely broaden and evolve in terms of substance. Participants discussed the UN-NGO relationship and explored ways of building more productive ties between the United Nations and NGOs. This is timely because of growing UN interest in civil society and the forthcoming report by the secretary-general on NGO issues.

#### **Context**

Participants discussed globalization trends that are contributing to a plethora of new nonstate actors and new paradigms to understand the changing context of governance. They cited factors that reflect changes in global dynamics and that support the need for rethinking of UN-NGO relationships.

- The role of nation-states is changing as global civil society grows and becomes more robust.
- The needs of the United Nations and member states for partnership with civil society are increasing, but are not well defined.
- Demands on the UN system have increased in a time of decreasing availability of government resources for humanitarian and development assistance.
- NGOs are seeking greater access to arenas of policy and decision making that have, to date, been the sole domain of member states. At the same time, NGOs recognize that their role with the United Nations is consultative.

In recent decades, there has been a significant increase in the resources NGOs can direct toward technical assistance worldwide.

## **Recommendations**

Discussion among participants on UN-NGO relationships focused primarily on the following areas:

- The need for sustainable partnerships between the United Nations and NGOs
- UN transparency
- NGO access and participation

As a result of a lively exchange of ideas and perspectives, participants strongly affirmed the mutual benefits of constructive and sustainable partnerships between NGOs and the various UN bodies and other entities. They made several recommendations that addressed issues of information and transparency, notably extending access and accreditation. Participants suggested ways to facilitate the UN-NGO relationship without undermining member states' authority at the United Nations or burdening the United Nations. These include:

- Extending the ECOSOC rules and accreditation processes to the UN General Assembly and its subsidiary bodies, including working groups.

- Reviewing and revising accreditation procedures to make them more objective, transparent, nonpolitical, prompt, and efficient.
- Allowing NGOs access to all UN bodies and fora that are open to all member states.
- Strengthening mechanisms for increased access to information for member states, as well as NGOs. This includes upgrading the UN Optical Disc System to include working documents and make it more accessible to all; it also includes expanding and upgrading the UN Web site.
- Revising technical means to better facilitate formal and informal interaction between the United Nations and NGOs at Headquarters.
- Encouraging leadership in the United Nations, the Secretariat, NGOs, and member states to foster effective partnerships between the United Nations and NGOs.
- Shifting the United Nations' mind-set to one that fosters openness and transparency and that recognizes and efficiently utilizes the resources and skills resident in the new global civil society.

## **Implementation**

Efforts to address UN-NGO interaction and relationships have been stymied in recent times. To meet the global opportunities that lie ahead, the United Nations and NGOs must reassess their own strengths, weaknesses, and comparative advantages. They must approach one another with an institutional will to collaborate where appropriate and feasible. Participants were very clear on what should happen from this point forward:

- The United Nations must clearly define and articulate what it wants and needs from the NGO community through substantive discussion and review of positive UN-NGO partnership models.
- The Secretariat should take a leadership role in clarifying NGO participation and access within the entire UN system. The secretary-general's upcoming report will be an excellent opportunity to initiate this.

- The Secretariat should allocate greater human and material resources within its own offices to NGO issues so that it fosters sustainable partnerships.
- The various UN deliberative bodies, with substantive NGO input, should take appropriate actions to shift practices toward greater operational openness and transparency.

Participants concluded that the preparation processes leading up to the planned Millennium Assembly offer an excellent opportunity to overcome past frustrations and move UN-NGO relationships toward a pattern of constructive sustainable partnership. They urged that this opportunity not be missed.

# Participants

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## **Chair**

**Richard H. Stanley**, President, The Stanley Foundation

## **Participants**

**Barbara Adams**, Deputy to the Coordinator, United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service

**Mia Adjali**, Main Representative to the United Nations, General Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church

**Techeste Ahderom**, Main Representative to the United Nations, Baha'i International Community

**G. S. Akunwafor**, Deputy Permanent Representative of Nigeria to the United Nations

**Anwarul Karim Chowdhury**, Permanent Representative of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to the United Nations

**Clarence J. Dias**, President, International Center for Law in Development

**Samuel R. Insanally**, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Guyana to the United Nations

**Ahmad Kamal**, Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations

**Atul Khare**, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations

**Edward C. Luck**, Executive Director, Center for the Study of International Organization, New York University School of Law

**Afaf Mahfouz**, President, Conference of Nongovernmental Organizations in Consultative Status With the United Nations Economic and Social Council

**Ngonlardje-Kabra Mbaidjol**, Deputy Director, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Liaison Office

**Drew McVey**, Second Secretary, Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations

**Amina Mesdoua**, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Algeria to the United Nations

**António Monteiro**, Permanent Representative of Portugal to the United Nations

**William R. Pace**, Executive Director, World Federalist Movement and Institute for Global Policy

**James A. Paul**, Executive Director, Global Policy Forum

**Paul J. A. M. Peters**, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the United Nations

**Karin Ryan**, Assistant Director for Human Rights, The Carter Center

**Nafis Sadik**, Executive Director and Under-Secretary-General, United Nations Population Fund

**Seth D. Winnick**, Minister Counsellor and Deputy Representative on the Economic and Social Council, United States Mission to the United Nations

**Joan Winship**, Vice President, The Stanley Foundation

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**Susan R. Moore**, Conference Management Associate

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Affiliations are listed for identification purposes only. Participants attended as individuals rather than as representatives of their governments or organizations.

# Opening Remarks

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by Richard H. Stanley, President, The Stanley Foundation



## **Introduction**

Welcome to the Stanley Foundation's conference on UN Issues. For thirty years we have convened this conference series to address a wide variety of issues related to the United Nations and global governance. This year's topic, "The United Nations and Civil Society: The Role of NGOs" is indeed timely. The United Nations is grappling with how it should relate with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

NGOs have been on the UN scene from the beginning. However, with accelerating globalization and the revolution in information and communications technology, NGOs have proliferated in recent years. In the 1990s, they have had increasing and unprecedented involvement in programs and policies of the United Nations. For many years, NGOs have partnered with or been contracted by the United Nations on specific programs, primarily humanitarian service delivery. This NGO role seems straightforward and relatively noncontroversial. More recently, however, NGOs have sought a greater role in governance and decision making. Also, new types of nonstate actors have emerged and they, along with traditional NGOs, are asking for greater "access" to the United Nations. These developments have raised questions and have resulted in efforts to try to define appropriate roles and relationships.

In late 1996, a subgroup of the General Assembly Working Group on the Reform of the UN System was formed to deal with issues related to NGO access to the UN system. Several meetings of the subgroup were held in the first half of 1997. No agreement could be reached on the group's own mandate, and substantive discussion did not take place. Unanswered questions and concerns remain, and the venue for dealing with them is unclear.

NGOs are diverse, heterogeneous, and independent. They tend to focus around particular issues or causes. They vary widely in organizational structure, size, and membership. They are diverse in mission, level of resources, methods of operating, governance, constituencies, effectiveness, and credibility. Some NGOs develop ongoing partnerships with governments and receive large amounts of government funding, raising questions of their independence. Others have rather adversarial relationships with governments, perhaps affecting their ability to influence government policy. Some are transnational, and others are national or local. Most transnational NGOs are supportive of the United Nations, but some US national ones seek to undermine UN credibility and activities.

NGOs have had a significant influence in negotiating and crafting multilateral treaties, and in achieving peace settlements in the midst of civil wars. They have raised awareness and mobilized support among governments for important environmental, population, and human rights issues. The campaign by NGOs to ban land mines and their influence on International Criminal Court negotiations are well known. They have served as vital information gatherers for missions with limited staff resources. They provide the international community with useful information on country conditions and compliance with international standards. It is estimated that international NGOs provide as much as \$8 billion in development and relief assistance each year, helping to fill the growing gap between needs for such assistance and the capabilities of the United Nations and other international and national sources.

The nature and degree of NGO access to the United Nations have evolved in recent years. NGOs currently have three classifications of consultative status at the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The accreditation system allows greater access for NGOs operating in more than one country. Access means different things: the right to circulate documents; access to informal preparatory meetings; observation and monitoring of various proceedings; the right to speak at meetings. Also, NGOs can be granted association with the Department of Public Information (DPI) which permits access, but not participation in UN meetings or deliberations. The United Nations also provides one-time NGO accreditation for a specific event such as a conference, which does not imply an ongoing affiliation.



The number of affiliated NGOs at the United Nations has grown significantly. Those in consultative status with ECOSOC have increased from 377 in 1968 to 1,350 in 1998; those associated with DPI have increased from 200 to 1,550 in the same time period. There has been significant integration of NGOs into the work and activities of the United Nations in the field, but not at UN headquarters. NGOs continue to press for representation and consultative status beyond the ECOSOC arena and throughout the UN system, especially in the General Assembly and Security Council. The Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, commonly referred to as CONGO, remains in close touch with UN representatives involved in addressing access issues. In addition, the NGO Working Group on the Security Council in New York has maintained periodic, albeit informal, dialogue with accredited NGOs.

As NGO presence and participation at the United Nations have grown, some member nations have expressed growing opposition to increased access. Clearly, the growing numbers of NGOs impose administrative and communications burdens on the United Nations. NGOs fear that administrative procedures and concerns of member nations about their growing influence are resulting in what can be considered a “rolling back” of NGO participation. They view with alarm actions in both intergovernmental and national arenas that include restricting the areas of NGO activities, charging for access to the Optical Disc System (ODS), changing accreditation requirements, and restricting the tax-exempt status of NGOs.

Some national government officials are uneasy about broadening NGO access for several reasons. First, the large and growing numbers of NGOs make free and open participation by all more difficult for reasons that range from administrative and procedural to security. Second, NGOs are not representative in the sense that they have an externally defined geographic or community constituency. At best, they represent the interests and concerns of their members. At worst, they represent only the agendas of their founders or leaders. To complicate matters further, many NGOs with considerable access to the United Nations are from the North, and there are concerns that they do not necessarily share the perspectives and interests of those in the Southern Hemisphere. This arouses concerns that NGO influences and contributions to UN work may be skewed

in one direction. Third, some member nations argue that NGOs should focus on gaining access to governments in the countries they represent rather than working in intergovernmental arenas. Also, some argue that NGOs function far more effectively in bodies that have highly specific functions and not in general political forums such as the General Assembly where a wide variety of issues and problems are addressed.

In addition to concerns, NGOs are sometimes seen as being in the vanguard of the intercultural penetration which is taking place in these times of globalization. They are often agents of change, and this can be upsetting to long-established cultures and practices and to governments as well.

Finally, not all NGOs support strengthening the international community. A growing number of NGOs function as geopolitical interest groups, with agendas that undermine the development of common international goals and priorities, as well as intergovernmental collaboration on issues of concern.

## **Paradigms in a Changing World**

I find it helpful to explore relationships between the United Nations and NGOs within the broad context of how the world makes and carries out group decisions in this era of increasing globalization. My understanding of this draws heavily on the work of Dr. David Ronfeldt, a social scientist in the International Policy Department at RAND.

Societal decisions and actions can be viewed in a paradigm of the interaction of three different domains. Undoubtedly, this matrix-like view appeals to my engineering background. However, I believe it is instructive and offers helpful insights.

One dimension or domain of this matrix is institutional or hierarchical. This domain includes the system of nation-states and intergovernmental bodies. Governments have authority and the power to compel. They, and only they, can tax, regulate, and legislate “rules of the road” for those within their jurisdiction. Whether democratic or not, governments can and do exercise command and control within their jurisdictions. International intergovernmental organizations including the United Nations, are part of this

institutional or hierarchical domain. In spite of language in the preamble of the UN Charter expressing the goals of “We the peoples of the United Nations...,” the UN structure itself is firmly founded upon the nation-state system and the principle of one nation, one vote in the General Assembly. The United Nations can decide and act only with the concurrence and support of its member nations.

The institutional or hierarchical dimension or domain has the strengths of stability, continuity, and authority. Concurrently, this domain has the weaknesses of tending to be bureaucratic, slow to act, and inclined toward maintaining the status quo. It is often seen as being slow and sometimes failing to respond to changing circumstances and the needs of people.

The second matrix dimension or domain is the market enterprise system. It is responding rapidly to globalization opportunities and grappling with the accompanying challenges. This domain includes many diverse enterprises all driven by economic viability. These enterprises produce goods and services and sell them to customers at a sufficient margin to maintain viability and achieve a return on the investment required. They compete with one another for market share. The more enlightened ones give high priority to customer satisfaction, a long-term perspective and results, and good corporate citizenship. The less enlightened give priority to short-term, narrow self-interest.

The market enterprise system is very good at quick responses to changing customer needs and desires. It rapidly allocates and reallocates resources to this end. It abhors waste and inefficiency.

Among its weaknesses, an unregulated market enterprise system does not do well on the distributional aspects of economic gain. It responds to factors that can be monetized and tends to ignore those which cannot. To be maximally advantageous to society, the market economic system must be regulated by the institutional or hierarchical domain in areas such as antitrust, environmental protection, labor practices, and similar matters. Left unregulated, it devolves into “robber-baron” capitalism or criminal activity.

The third dimension or domain is what has come to be called civil society. This is the most diverse and fluid of the dimensions or

domains. It includes the myriad of interactions, communications, and alliances by and among individual citizens and their voluntary associations and organizations. The civil society or networking domain is greatly facilitated by the information and communication revolution of recent years which allows individuals to gather information quickly and to communicate instantly, irrespective of distance and boundaries. It facilitates alliances around causes, ideas, and issues. It encourages a free flow of people and ideas. Along with the market enterprise domain, it fosters the interpenetration of cultures. The civil society domain includes a wide variety of nonstate actors and is much more than traditional NGOs.

NGOs, broadly defined, are probably the best available proxy for civil society, but there are questions about which nonstate actors should be included in the NGO definition, as well as whether there is a North-South skewing among NGOs. How are local governments, parliamentarians, coalitions of nonstate actors, and others to be considered?

Civil society has great strengths in gathering and distributing information. It is effective in focusing attention on issues and generating ideas for their resolution. It can build shared values and encourage awareness.

However, civil society is the least well-structured of the three domains. It is very fluid and flexible. Public interest tends to have a short-term perspective, focusing on issues of immediate concern. At the same time, some NGOs have maintained consistent attention to long-term issues. Civil society does not have structured decision-making processes. While it can claim to “speak for” some constituencies, it cannot claim to be representative in the sense of having an externally defined constituency that can exercise governance.

These three domains are complementary. No domain will or should supplant another. Each has its own strengths and areas of competency as well as its weaknesses and deficiencies.

Our challenge, it seems to me, is to understand the multiple interactions between these three domains and strive to achieve relationships and practices at domain interfaces which are most conducive to constructive and positive results.

The Stanley Foundation has long focused on the goal of a secure peace with freedom and justice. Achieving this objective will, I believe, require constructive interaction among the institutional, the market enterprise, and the civil society domains, not dominance by or suppression of any one of them.

## **The United Nations and NGOs**

Our task this weekend is to explore and develop policy proposals on what will be the most constructive interrelationship between the United Nations and civil society, in this case represented by NGOs. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan expressed the goal we are seeking in his address to the General Assembly on the opening of the 52<sup>nd</sup> session, September 22, 1997. He said, “We aspire to a United Nations that recognizes, and joins in partnership with, an ever more robust global civil society, while helping to eliminate uncivil elements like drug traffickers, criminals, and terrorists....”

In his January 1998 address to the World Economic Forum, he went on to say “...peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnerships involving governments, international organizations, the business community, and civil society.” He also noted that “...the United Nations is at present inadequately equipped to engage civil society and make it a true partner in its work.”

As we begin our discussion, let me suggest several areas of exploration that might be fruitful.

First, we need to be clear about what characterizes an NGO and the relationship between NGOs and civil society. How well do NGOs serve as a proxy for civil society?

Next, it will be useful for us to examine the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the United Nations as a part of the institutional domain and of NGOs as a part of the civil society domain. For our discussions this weekend, we are primarily concerned about these two domains, although some of their interactions with the market enterprise domain may be germane. What is and should be the role for civil society at the United Nations with respect to global decision making and priority setting? Our objective is to find ways in which, at their interfaces, the strengths of the United Nations and the NGOs can complement the weaknesses or meet the needs of the other.

Third, it will be useful for us to explore partnering between the United Nations and the NGOs. This is a term that is being used increasingly by the secretary-general as he contemplates the Millennium Assembly and the United Nations of the twenty-first century. There are good examples of UN-NGO partnering from which helpful lessons can be learned.

In the business world where I spend most of my time, partnering is gaining currency. As applied there, partnering includes the recognition that the parties involved have common interests and shared goals. Built on this, partnering agreements codify how the parties will work with each other in times of agreement and disagreement. They deal with openness and sharing of information. They deal with channels for communication, procedures for handling disagreements, and processes that will allow work to go forward while differences are resolved. They seek collaborative rather than adversarial resolution of differences.

Fourth, we should revisit UN accreditation processes. What are their objectives? How important is accreditation to the UN-NGO relationship? How well does it work? Are there other means, formal or informal, to respond to concerns and requests for NGO "access."

Finally, what kinds of arrangements could optimize UN and NGO relationships without compromising NGO independence or member state prerogatives?

## **Conclusion**

NGOs have become true partners in service delivery of humanitarian and development efforts in the field. The new challenge lies in bridging the gap between the United Nations and NGOs at headquarters, and in developing the most constructive and appropriate UN and NGO relationships within the global decision-making and policy-setting arenas.

A complex bureaucracy, differing agendas, and the diversity and number of NGOs around the world make it difficult to find and forge new paths toward collaboration. Your commitment to these issues, and what I am sure will be a lively exchange of ideas here, can certainly help move this process forward. I look forward to our discussions.

# Conference Report

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## Introduction

In the 1990s nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have had an increasing and unprecedented role in programs and policies of the United Nations. Prior to the world conferences of the 1990s, NGOs typically partnered with the United Nations on specific programs, primarily humanitarian service delivery. More recently, they have sought greater influence in governance and decision making as well.

Controversy has arisen as more and more NGOs seek greater access to the policy process. Some member states are concerned about excessive NGO involvement and influence, particularly as NGOs demand more say and accountability on issues of peace, security, and human rights. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's July 10, 1998, report "Arrangements and Practices for the Interaction of Nongovernmental Organizations in All Activities of the UN System" (A/53/170) reaffirmed the importance of NGOs to the UN process but did not substantively address issues of access and roles.

The Stanley Foundation convened its thirtieth United Nations Issues Conference, "The United Nations and Civil Society: The Role of NGOs," to explore the issues surrounding the importance, potential, and problems regarding the relationships between NGOs and the United Nations.<sup>1</sup> The conference brought together key participants from the UN and NGO communities to address these issues and to move toward constructive, realistic strategies for addressing them. Participants explored evolving geopolitical and economic paradigms; the changing needs and roles of NGOs and the United Nations; and the technical and formal issues of NGO access to UN bodies, agencies, and decision-making processes.

## Framing the Issues

The United Nations faces tremendous complexities simply through changes in the role of nation-states and their political and economic authority. The end of the Cold War redefined the global geopolitical context and provided a vacuum into which a multitude

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<sup>1</sup>Please refer to the Stanley Foundation's report on the 25th United Nations Issues Conference (1994) "The UN System and NGOs: New Relationships for a New Era?"

of new nonstate actors have entered through political participation, economic production, trade, and advocacy. The paradigm has changed and continues to do so. The global community that shapes policy and wields influence no longer resides solely with nation-states and intergovernmental bodies. The new global community resides within interactive spheres, such as states; NGOs; market enterprises; international financial organizations; global activists; and international organized crime rings, interest groups, and associations. This evolving interactive world gives rise to both complementarity and contradiction. The challenge for the United Nations and its members, as some participants noted, is to understand the multiple interactions between the different spheres or domains and to seek partnerships and practices which most effectively support achievement of common humanitarian and development goals. The United Nations must change and adapt. It must learn to operate in this new paradigm.

Several participants observed that the United Nations remains somewhat out of touch with the new global reality. Therefore, there is an urgent need to continually reassess relationships and address

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***...the United Nations is... ill-equipped to address crises...taking place in this new world of geoeconomics.***

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the ongoing effects of globalization. One participant noted that the United Nations is still structured to function in a world of geopolitics and, consequently, is ill-equipped to address crises (e.g., the recent financial collapse in Asia) taking place in this new world of geoeconomics. As civil society continues to expand and become more robust, the global citizenry has become increasingly voluble in demands for governmental and intergovernmental accountability. NGOs bring many of these voices to UN meetings and conferences in lobbying for greater access to policymakers and the decision-making process itself. These voices were particular-

ly enhanced through the series of world conferences called by the United Nations in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> There is an inevitable tension here. NGOs, diversified in who and what they represent and flexible by

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<sup>2</sup>World Conferences: UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992); World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993); International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994); World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995); Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995); UN Conference on Human Settlements (Istanbul, 1996).



nature, advocate for and bring a multitude of *ideas* to defining global agendas. Member states, bound to formal political and geographic structures, are expected to represent the *peoples* and interests of their nations. The institutional mandate of member states is far more complex than that of NGOs. As such, they must interact with a wide range of nonstate actors, including transnational corporations, governments, interest groups, nonprofit institutions, etc. These relationships are difficult and not well defined.

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*...the issues and recommendations raised by participants centered on the UN headquarters....*

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As of yet, there is no integration of the comparative advantages and roles that each sphere can apply to the work of the United Nations. A complication within the NGO community is that Northern NGOs continue to dominate agenda setting at the United Nations with Southern NGOs underrepresented. This highlights the need to bridge the North-South divisions that continue to hinder intergovernmental operations.

There have also been significant changes in the function and work of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since its inception. It has gradually assumed the status of a policymaking body on economic and social issues. It is the primary UN entity which grants NGO consultative status. Yet, ECOSOC and the broader United Nations have not clearly defined the role and participation of NGOs at the United Nations. Similarly, the Committee on NGOs of ECOSOC that oversees accreditation and regulation, beset by geopolitical struggles, does not operate on a set of transparent, objective criteria. The number of NGOs without consultative status has increased dramatically in the 1990s, and the United Nations is currently unable to handle the number of applications on a timely basis.

Conference participants agreed that the discussions should focus primarily on decision-making and priority-setting processes. UN-NGO partnerships at the field or operational level seem to function well, for the most part. Concerns in that arena arise more out of implementation issues rather than from policy or philosophical conflicts. Therefore, the issues and recommendations raised by participants centered on the UN headquarters, the secretary-general's efforts to facilitate UN partnerships with civil society, and the formal and informal processes that govern NGO access and participation at the United Nations.

## Sustainable Partnerships and Relationship Needs

Participants gave strong support to developing good, complementary, and mutually beneficial relationships between NGOs, the United Nations, and member states. Participants had very lively and fruitful discussions over issues of partnership between the United Nations and NGOs. The most commonly used conference terminology for this was “sustainable partnerships.” Before addressing procedural issues, it was suggested that the *nature* of NGO participation within the UN system must be clearly understood by all relevant actors. The United Nations, probably in a process led by the Secretariat, must clearly define what kind of relationship it seeks with NGOs. Then, the terms of partnership, it was decided, must be very clearly defined and understood throughout the UN system. The Conference of Nongovernmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO) will be meeting over the next several months to address partnerships and relationships between NGOs and member states. It was hoped that practical, timely measures emerge from these meetings along with efforts by the Secretariat, member states, and NGOs.

It was noted that NGOs have a *consultative* role. They are not the decision makers and are not in a position to negotiate with the United Nations in decision-making and policy-setting arenas. Several NGO participants emphasized that NGOs want greater access to the United Nations in a consultative capacity. They do not seek to replace or assume the role of government. NGOs and member states, with their comparative strengths and weaknesses, have different contributions to make to the work of the United Nations.

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*The most commonly used conference terminology ... was “sustainable partnerships.”*

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Participants agreed that the relationship between NGOs and member states and UN headquarters need not be adversarial, but that this was possible only through mutual understanding of expectations, procedures, and comparative advantages.

### Positive Partnerships

The discussion then focused on what constitutes effective partnership. Participants identified several crucial elements involved in structuring linkages between parties.

Good partnerships have the following qualities:

- Mutual recognition of participation
- Transparency
- Inclusion
- Neutrality and integrity of actors
- Diversity
- Mutual respect amongst partners
- Flexibility that allows for initiative
- Accountability

As part of their role and function, NGOs hold governments accountable for preserving the human rights of their peoples but, in many situations, can pursue collaborative, nonadversarial efforts with governments to pursue common goals. Participants felt that the substantial resources available to NGOs can be utilized to strategically support the work of UN headquarters and agencies through collaborative efforts in information dissemination, service delivery, and consultations. Before this can happen operationally, participants raised issues that need to be addressed before determining how best to proceed.

- Identify ways in which NGOs can associate with the work of, and partner with, the UN system on a daily basis.
- Identify the specific technical means (formal and informal mechanisms) by which the UN headquarters and agencies can access NGO input and information and vice versa.
- Identify partnerships that can serve as potential models for enhancing NGO effectiveness and contribution to the work of the United Nations.

- Strategize how experiences of NGOs in various countries can support the work of the Security Council and other levels of the UN system. Suggest potential relationships that can be constructed to enhance UN efforts at various levels with NGOs.

Participants reviewed a history of constructive partnerships between the United Nations and NGOs. The world conferences on the environment (Rio), on women (Beijing), and on the new International Criminal Court are a few examples. UN agencies such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) partner extensively with NGOs on an ongoing basis in developing and implementing field-level programs. Some participants suggested that in the five-year review processes set up by the 1990s world conferences, the United Nations should include determination of how appropriate NGOs can become involved in sustained partnerships with UN entities.

Participants discussed the role of NGOs and comparative advantages and disadvantages they bring to a potential partnership. NGOs have a long list of accomplishments in many areas, including humanitarian relief, environmental preservation, nuclear disarmament, and advocacy for the rights and welfare of disadvantaged groups. Participants identified key strengths, limitations, and resources of NGOs.

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- NGOs are diverse, often flexible in structure, skilled in lobbying, and are often equipped with extensive analytical and research capabilities. They can provide access to grassroots efforts and perspectives.
- Many NGOs function at the field level and provide service delivery to the tune of \$8 billion per year, more than the entire UN system. Service delivery takes the form of humanitarian aid, as well as development and technical assistance to disadvantaged groups worldwide.
- NGOs can be very effective in raising visibility and consciousness concerning human rights and other issues of global concern that governments

have failed to address. At international policy conferences, they have provided much needed information to resource-strapped delegations, raised public awareness of global problems and mobilized successful campaigns to address them.

- NGOs often serve as the *conscience* of governments and provide a marketplace of ideas from which creative, effective strategies and solutions are devised.
- NGOs do not necessarily represent externally defined constituencies. They sometimes represent particular interest groups whose motives are self-centered. Some are small enough to be labeled “NGIs,” meaning nongovernmental individuals.
- NGOs are probably the best available proxy for civil society. Yet their strength is in their information, ideas, and initiative rather than in their representativeness. NGOs cannot and should not replace governments, but can certainly give voice to underrepresented peoples in intergovernmental fora.
- NGOs are more well developed in the North. Northern NGOs continue to be overrepresented at UN headquarters.
- NGOs maintain an inordinate focus on particular issues such as environment and human rights and, in the process, neglect others such as development and political and security issues.

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*In large part, the United Nations has not yet made the transition to the multiple-domain, interactive, and collaborative world of today and the future.*

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## **Information and Transparency**

Participants concluded that information and transparency are the keys to constructive relationships between the United Nations and civil society, including NGOs. In large part, the United Nations has not yet made the transition to the multiple-domain, interactive, and collaborative world of today and the future. It remains in a geopolitical paradigm where hierarchical decision making, tight control of information, and isolation of decision makers from the world-at-large were the norm.

The real challenge to the United Nations and its members is to change their mind-set and pattern of operations to one that is rooted in openness, transparency, and wide access to information. Participants, notably member representatives, support the need for privacy in negotiations and discussions of sensitive issues. These sessions should be kept closed. However, nearly all UN activity can and should be *declassified* and made accessible and transparent.

For the near term, participants brought forth a number of specific recommendations that fell into the broad categories of *extending access* and *reforming accreditation*. These categories stem from historical struggles regarding NGO access to the entire UN system as well as the nature of their participation.

### **Extending Access**

Many participants were very concerned about formal and informal access for NGOs to the UN system. Conflicts and debates continue over NGO access, with the same issues revisited time and again. Ongoing debates waste valuable time and resources. Some participants suggested that there is an embedded UN resistance to providing NGOs with information, including at the Secretariat.

There was general agreement on the need for a comprehensive review of the issues of access for NGOs to the UN system. Many participants expressed the view that all UN processes should, to the extent reasonable and practical, be made open and accessible to the world. Various recommendations brought forth at the conference identify specific means to make the United Nations as a whole more accessible. At a very general level, mechanisms should be created to support informal interaction between the United Nations and NGOs. Such informal interaction often yields great progress in support of UN programs and policymaking.

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### ***Conflicts and debates continue over NGO access....***

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However, some member states have serious reservations about increased NGO access to information and general transparency of the work of the United Nations. They fear that NGOs may usurp or unreasonably influence nation-state prerogatives. They worry that NGOs may undermine or attack national leadership or policies. Some member states themselves feel excluded from various arenas, such

as the Security Council. Efforts must be made to address specific concerns of member states about greater access for NGOs, and participants hoped that this would be done openly and objectively. Most participants urged that transparency and information need to be extended to NGOs beyond their official consultative status with ECOSOC. Many NGOs are requesting access to the General Assembly, moving beyond the current informal meetings between a select group of NGOs and the Security Council.

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*There are no mechanisms through which NGOs can be kept apprised of what occurs during informal meetings convened by member states.*

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There is a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding among member states and NGOs about one another. Member states are concerned about preserving their own rights to make policy and to access information. NGOs perceive that certain meetings are deemed informal rather arbitrarily, sometimes in part to prevent them from obtaining relevant documentation. As of yet, there are no mechanisms through which NGOs can be kept apprised of what occurs during informal meetings convened by member states. Many NGOs seek processes for sustained fruitful dialogue and interaction between the United Nations and NGOs rather than being granted direct access to General Assembly speeches. One or more participants recommended the following;

- Formalized mechanisms for access by NGOs should be reviewed and redefined, including the circumstances under which meetings are made informal, thereby closing them to NGOs.
- One significant proposal, which received strong participant support, was that the ECOSOC NGO rules and privileges should be extended to the General Assembly and its related and subsidiary bodies, including working groups.
- A related significant proposal, which most participants also supported strongly, was that NGOs should have access to all meetings that are open to all member states. The mechanisms for informal, closed meetings among member states would be preserved, providing opportunity for negotiations and handling of sensitive matters. This would maintain the member state decision-making authority.

- To augment their often limited resources and enhance civil society participation, member states should include NGOs in government delegations to world conferences, UN commissions, and other such meetings. NGOs often provide missions with crucial information on other sessions and country-based information that aid them in the negotiating process.
- In an effort to make NGO input a truly global practice at the United Nations, the Secretariat and member states should revive the trust fund for Southern NGOs to provide funding for travel and other costs associated with participation at UN events and meetings. UNFPA serves as an example whereby various member states collectively provide a trust fund to support country and NGO representation for conferences, follow-up, and other activities. This should be an established practice throughout the UN system.
- During the CONGO regional consultations regarding NGO partnerships with the UN system, parallel meetings for NGOs should be held. This can further strengthen partnership possibilities in expanding the range of ideas, identifying common concerns and priorities, and addressing areas of conflict. Regional consultations should be complemented by attendance of Southern NGOs at meetings and conferences in New York. In a similar vein, some participants urged member states to grant permission more quickly for NGOs, particularly those in the South, to come to headquarters and regional meetings since adequate notice is essential in order to make travel arrangements.

*The Optical Disk System (ODS) of the UN Information System is very slow and presently ill-equipped to handle the information needs of member states and others, including NGOs. Access to the ODS for NGOs has been controversial, with participants noting that in 1998 the United Nations attempted to charge NGOs as much as \$1,500 per year for access. This fee, and even one of a few hundred dollars, is prohibitive for almost all NGOs and was regarded by them as a formidable obstacle to their participation in the work of the United Nations. To best serve the information needs of member states, as well as to foster communication and collaboration with NGOs, one or more participants recommended the following:*



- The United Nations should upgrade the ODS system by adding a new ODS server to improve access for member states and others.
- All conference and working documents should be posted on the Internet so that member states can access them far more easily and communicate relevant information to their governments in a timely manner. This will also reduce communication costs if member states no longer need to fax documents to their governments. It will also enable NGOs to access the documents and improve coordination and collaboration between the United Nations and NGOs.
- Free access for NGOs should be provided to working documents at the United Nations. In addition, the ODS should be made available to NGOs at no charge; if it is decided that there must be a charge, it should be no more than \$100 per annum. This would greatly enhance the potential for partnerships in UN efforts and NGO capacity to participate in and contribute to a particular process. One participant remarked that there are no technological or funding constraints to information sharing, but that transparency requires institutional support.
- Additional personnel time should be allocated to the Dag Hammarskjöld Library at the United Nations to augment Internet capabilities. The library would then be able to more efficiently handle the information needs of member states and others. Low-cost ways, including a reallocation of UN resources, to upgrade the UN Web site and library capabilities should be found.

*Participants suggested that the 1996/31 document be formally reviewed and disseminated widely since it provides a blueprint for NGO access.<sup>3</sup> Document 96/31 does not allow the United Nations to charge NGOs with consultative status for access to documents. Both NGOs and member states have little awareness of those provisions, as well as other provisions allowing for physical space and other forms of*

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<sup>3</sup>ECOSOC resolution 1996/31 contains revised arrangements for NGO consultation with ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies, as well as NGO participation in UN conferences.

access for NGOs to the UN system. Many issues that continue to be part of an ongoing UN-NGO debate have already been addressed by this document.

*An office within the UN Secretariat should be created specifically to interact with NGOs. This would entail additional resources, but would yield great results in terms of facilitating sustainable partnerships. The Secretariat's efforts and position regarding NGOs need to be made transparent so member states (and NGOs) have a better understanding of its vision and interests vis-à-vis civil society, including NGOs. In addition, increased human and material resources would further support the secretary-general's efforts to strategically explore UN and civil society partnerships.*

### **Accreditation**

Participants expressed great concerns about accreditation problems, including the work of the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs. Participants encouraged that the committee should be significantly restructured. This could greatly enhance public and institutional perceptions of transparency and due process in how the committee addresses NGO issues. The committee is a crucial venue in which to resolve accreditation problems; it is the guiding body that, in theory, operationalizes policy directives in structuring access and participation of NGOs at the United Nations. In addition, it was noted that until differing perspectives among member states who support NGOs and those who do not are resolved through consensus, the accreditation process will continue to be inefficient, nontransparent, and arbitrary. Accreditation was considered to be a crucial, formal venue for improving access with the understanding that, insofar as the United Nations operates more openly and transparently, accreditation recedes in importance.

*The ECOSOC Committee on NGOs operates without consistent, objective standards for accrediting NGOs. It is hindered by the absence of operating principles and by political pressure from member states. One or more participants recommended the following:*

- The Committee on Accreditation should be reconfigured so it is comprised of experts on civil society, thereby depoliticizing the process of review and approval on applications for consultative status.

- A comprehensive review of the accreditation process for NGOs should be conducted. A simple, standardized objective system for granting consultative status with the United Nations should be created. Past international conferences may offer effective models for NGO accreditation.
- NGOs perceive that they are arbitrarily treated in the accreditation process. For example, applications by some NGOs that consist essentially of one member are approved and others with much larger membership are inexplicably denied. As part of restructuring the accreditation process, a system of checks and balances should be set up to accurately determine accountability among NGOs in their representativeness and potential contribution to the work of the United Nations. The accrediting body should have a clear sense of who and what constitutes each NGO, be it individual representatives, organizational mandates, or agendas.
- Southern NGOs are not adequately represented among those granted consultative status with the United Nations, perhaps an issue to be addressed by the Committee on NGOs, CONGO, and the NGO community at large.
- To make the process transparent, negotiations and meetings regarding accreditation between CONGO and the Committee on NGOs should potentially involve NGOs who are not members of CONGO.
- The length of time from submission of an application by an NGO to approval or rejection by the committee is very long. Some participants reported a two-year backlog of applications awaiting review by the committee. Secretariat personnel and material resources should be increased to permit a prompt preliminary screen of NGO applications and expedite handling of the flood of applications that are processed by the committee.
- Members of the Secretariat should be formally briefed on the 96/31 document. Participants recommended that the document be disseminated throughout the UN system under the auspices of the Secretariat. This document contains very good and clear language regarding the provision of resources to improve the

accreditation process and more clearly defines criteria for NGO participation and access at the United Nations. A concerted effort to implement 96/31 should be made since there is minimal awareness among member states and NGOs of its substance.

## **Conclusion**

There was strong concurrence at this conference that policymakers and NGOs must identify and pursue creative means for developing long-term UN-NGO partnerships, both in terms of technical and substantive participation. Efforts to clarify access and participation by NGOs at the United Nations have been unsuccessful thus far. Still, participants believe strongly that the creative and institutional will exists to make real progress. They urged the United Nations—particularly the Secretariat, CONGO, and the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs—to provide creative, assertive leadership; make Southern voices and perspectives an integral part of decision making; and allow for both informal and formal mechanisms through which fruitful, sustainable collaboration occurs. With focus and strength of will, reform of the accreditation process for NGOs, the development of dynamic UN-NGO partnerships for the new millennium, and implementation of mechanisms for accountability, trust can be achieved. There was great hope and anticipation among participants that the work of CONGO in this area and the forthcoming report by the secretary-general will address sustainable partnerships with NGOs in a constructive manner and lead to implementation of timely, effective measures.



PHOTOS BY KEITH PORTER



*Conference participants focused their efforts on ways to build sustainable partnerships between NGOs and the United Nations.*

## Chairman's Observations

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Participants at the Arden House conference voiced strong commitment to building constructive and mutually beneficial relationships between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations. They characterized the goal as a sustainable partnership. This concept is both constructive and appropriate. The United Nations and NGOs can be of great mutual assistance to each other in their respective missions and work.

The core challenge is to find the best balance between NGO access and UN transparency on the one hand, while reserving actual decision making to the member states and avoiding NGO interference on the other. NGO participants recognized this by emphasizing that the NGO role is a consultative one. NGOs are not the decision makers and are not in a position to negotiate with the United Nations in decision-making and policy-setting arenas, even though some voices in the NGO community may argue for this. In decision making and policy setting, the NGO comparative advantage is in information, analysis, ideas, focusing public concerns, and being a voice of conscience for the world community.

If NGOs are to be effective partners, they must be responsible and constructive in their participation. They must be academically honest in providing accurate and objective information and analysis. As a proxy for civil society, they must be civil in their interactions. To the extent they are passionate, they must understand the reality of differing passions. Their focus should be on constructive outcomes rather than self-promotion. Most NGOs are responsible and constructive and their consultative counsel is heard and often heeded.

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For the long run, the United Nations needs to adjust its paradigm and practices toward openness and transparency, minimizing secrecy and the use of closed informal or negotiating sessions. The latter are needed, but should be used only where there is clear necessity. To the extent the United Nations' paradigm is one of openness and transparency, the need for formally

defined relationships between NGOs and the United Nations will recede. Openness and transparency provide access for the entire world community and are consistent with the principles of democratic governance. The current formally defined relationships, including accreditation procedures, result in access for some, with others being limited or excluded.

In the short run, while the paradigm is changing, the United Nations can and should take several constructive actions. The ECOSOC rules and privileges for NGOs should be extended to the General Assembly and its related and subsidiary bodies, including working groups. NGOs should have access to all meetings and bodies that are open to all member states. UN information distribution channels should be improved and made more comprehensive and accessible for the benefit of member states as well as others. Working documents should be added to the Optical Disk System, and the access fees should be eliminated. The UN Web site should be strengthened and upgraded. The NGO accreditation process should be improved and streamlined to make it prompt, objective, and transparent. These and other actions proposed by conference participants would go a long way toward encouraging and reinforcing sustainable partnerships between the United Nations and civil society.

The historic nation-state hierarchy is increasingly complemented by entrepreneurial market enterprises and by civil society. This changes the context for governance. Good governance now requires constructive and sustainable partnerships between governmental and intergovernmental institutions and the other societal domains. Such partnerships will flourish in a climate of openness and transparency. The United Nations is uniquely situated to create and maintain such a climate and should act promptly to do so.

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This report was written by the rapporteur and edited by the chair. It contains their interpretation of the proceedings and is not merely a descriptive, chronological account. Participants neither reviewed nor approved the report. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

# The Stanley Foundation

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