

Civil Society and the United Nations¹

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In 1945, the founders of the United Nations created a special role for independent citizen organizations. In the arena of international diplomacy, previously the preserve of nation-states, this was a major departure.² International “non-governmental organizations,” with branches in many countries, gained access to “consultative status” with the UN Economic and Social Council, enabling them to speak and to present papers at Council meetings (United Nations, 1946). Trade union confederations, faith groups, disarmament movements, and business associations were among the first forty-one organizations to be admitted in 1948. Others soon followed.

Most NGO representatives in those early years were volunteers – people with great enthusiasm for the UN and a belief in its capacity to build a peaceful and just world order. They set out to discover how NGOs could influence intergovernmental policymaking and they learned how to lobby diplomats – sometimes on highly political topics like disarmament and decolonization. As the new headquarters structures rose on the East River, NGOs came to work there and others gathered at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, the UN’s second most important venue.

Over the years, NGOs became adept at advocacy skills for influencing international policy making: using the media, presenting original research, advancing novel ideas, bringing fresh information from the field, building alliance with friendly states (and amongst one another), and conveying the concerns of the world’s ordinary citizens. Numbers grew steadily, and by 1970 there were about four hundred NGOs inscribed on the ECOSOC accreditation list. Some member states complained that there were “too many” NGOs, a concern that persisted and even increased as NGO numbers swelled in future years.

Important new organizations arose, adding voices on women’s issues, the environment, health, population, indigenous peoples and human rights. Newly-decolonized states joined the UN’s membership at this time and brought new ideas for change into the organization on the member state side. These two kinds of newcomers promoted novel UN conferences and activities, stimulating a new level of NGO activity in the 1970s as steadily more NGOs gained accreditation. NGOs divided into specialized, issue-based committees, set up under the umbrella of CONGO, the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status with ECOSOC. The UN Department of Public Information (DPI) began to accredit nationally-based, often smaller NGOs, opening the UN to a wider mix of voices, including increasingly those from the global South. Special international meetings, such as the Stockholm Conference on the environment in 1972,

¹ This essay focuses on UN-civil society relations at headquarters in New York, which is the central locus of civil society-UN interaction. It does not deal with all aspects of UN-civil society relations, in all geographical regions and with all agencies, funds and programs – an enterprise far too broad for this undertaking.

² Some precedents did, in fact, exist as Seary notes in a helpful historical review (Seary, 1996), but the United Nations Charter – and the NGO activity that followed – still should be considered to be a major departure from previous concepts and practice.

opened the accreditation system wider, with less onerous accreditation processes and efforts to promote NGO participation.

In Geneva, the Human Rights Commission attracted a growing number of NGOs to its annual meetings, especially in the 1970s and beyond, as NGOs increasingly provided testimony about national human rights abuses. Amnesty International, founded in 1961 and developing into a powerful international network by the 1970s, contributed substantially to this process. Also at this time, UN agencies, funds and programs began to open their doors to civil society partners in their special field of competence (children, health, population, etc.) DPI organized weekly briefings for NGOs in New York and it also produced (in cooperation with an NGO advisory body) an annual conference that drew large numbers worldwide to headquarters. ECOSOC-accredited NGO rose to 600 by 1980 and nearly 1,000 by 1990, while hundreds more had an associative relationship with DPI. (Willems, 1996b)

NGO support for the UN was so strong and engagement with political issues so visible, that some observers began to speak of civil society as a new source of global influence, challenging the monopoly and even the primacy of nation states. Political scientists spoke of “the retreat of the state” and of “new actors” and “non-state actors” in the global policymaking process (Weiss and Gordenker, 1996; Strange, 1996; Higott et al, 2000). A new era, it was said, was dawning - especially as states were losing capacity and facing weakened public support in an increasingly privatized, neo-liberal world.

Those who predicted a steady upward path of civil society influence at the UN proved to be wrong. The picture today, in 2011, is more complex. There have been advances and setbacks, moments of accomplishment and of backward motion. Most significantly, states have remained strong primary actors and they have become less tolerant of civil society and for the “democratic opening” in international affairs in the 1980s and ‘90s. The 1990s seemed to represent a surge of democratic, social policy in the international sphere and a rise of NGO influence. But even then, the barriers for NGOs were rising and the balance of state policy shifting, foreshadowing more negative developments in 2000 and beyond.

The Dynamic 1990s

As the UN changed in the post-Cold War environment, some thought that a more just global order was about to emerge. A series of UN Global Conferences, beginning with the Rio Summit on the environment in 1992, attracted thousands of civil society organizations and activists, establishing the UN as an institution where citizen voices could be heard and have influence. Many NGOs saw the UN as an alternative space, especially open when compared to the undemocratic, financially-driven Bretton Woods Institutions and the G-8 meetings with their great-power exclusivity and neo-liberal orthodoxy. At the UN, a kinder, social democratic perspective was seen to prevail. The *Human Development Report* seemed to mark a new path in social policy (United Nations Development Programme, 1990). The UN housed innovative social thinkers like Pakistani Mahboub al-Haq of UNDP and IFI critics such as Canadian Stephen Lewis of UNICEF. As such, the UN came to be a rallying ground for like-minded NGOs, from the global North and South.

NGOs' surge of visibility drew not only on the political moment, but also on the emerging digital technology that they were quick to adopt. Email, the internet, and cellphones gave them a new global capacity at relatively low cost, enabling information exchange, public outreach and global coordination that gave them an advantage over governments. NGO advocacy at the UN could use a flow of information from every corner of the globe, and new sources of global policy thinking. While diplomats were still imprisoned in government secrecy and bureaucratic process, NGOs were moving ahead and bringing large publics with them.

After Rio, the UN organized a series of important global conferences - on Human Rights (1993 in Vienna), Population (1994 in Cairo), Women (1995 in Beijing), Social Development (1995 in Copenhagen), Food (1996 in Rome), and the 1998 conference in Rome to found the International Criminal Court. In each case, intergovernmental "Preparatory Committees" or "PrepComs" met multiple times over two or three years, for intense sessions of two weeks or more, to negotiate the final outcome document (four PrepComs were typical, but the ICC negotiations involved ten such meetings). This open process, created thanks to friendly diplomats and helpful Secretariat officials, enabled NGOs to participate actively in the shaping of conference results, by offering innovative ideas, coordinating joint advocacy, using media skillfully, and practicing savvy diplomacy.

The conferences attracted tens of thousands of NGO representatives, who assembled at their own parallel conferences and issued their own alternative declarations, pressing governments to do even more than the promises in official Declarations and Programs of Action. Conference follow-up sessions, in New York likewise attracted intense NGO interest and participation, especially the annual Commission on Sustainable Development that continued the work of Rio every year for two weeks in the spring. The UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS - an inter-agency body founded in 1975) gave valuable assistance, by organizing government funds for NGO travel to UN events, advising NGOs on how to advance their work, and providing helpful guidance for cooperation between NGOs and UN bodies.

Because the Conference PrepComs were often held in New York, they brought a flow of NGO representatives from all over the world to UN headquarters and stimulated interaction between NGOs and diplomats. This meant that the NGO presence better reflected the global citizen movements. It also resulted in new ideas and energy being injected into the policy discussions at headquarters.

The 1990s was a decade of civil society dynamism in other ways as well. In the Global South, strong and forward-looking new NGOs and NGO networks developed. IBASE in Brazil and Third World Network in Malaysia had already been founded in the 1980s.¹ Now they grew and flourished in the environment of the global conferences and the increasing optimism of southern-based leadership. Social Watch, based in Montevideo, grew directly out of the UN's Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, as a means to monitor the outcome commitments. These organizations, alliances, networks and caucuses proposed alternative ways of thinking and a more global approach to policymaking than the older NGO associations with Northern roots. In UN events they often were the most visible and they assumed leadership in thinking and action.

Some upstart Northern NGOs were active and innovative as well. In the last half of the decade, the World Federalist Movement provided leadership for the foundation of the International Criminal Court. The ICC would never have happened without the ideas, inspiration and hard work of the NGO-based Coalition for the ICC, a coalition which itself took on a global scope and embraced membership from the global South. About the same time, Global Policy Forum (with partners in Geneva and New York) set up the NGO Working Group on the Security Council, providing a regular means for interaction and dialogue between NGO representatives and Council ambassadors, as well as high UN officials. No one previously thought it would be possible for NGOs to meet with Council ambassadors, but in short order ambassadors were meeting this way on a very frequent basis and NGOs were able to learn about the Council's work and have input into the policy discussions. (Paul, 2004) In these and other cases, active NGOs worked in close partnership with friendly ambassadors such as Juan Somavia of Chile, Anwarul Chowdhury of Bangladesh, Antonio Monteiro of Portugal, and Ahmed Kamal of Pakistan.

During this period, two Secretary Generals regularly spoke about NGOs as the UN's "indispensable partners" and in similar positive terms. (Boutros-Ghali, 1996; United Nations, 2004b) However, Boutros Boutros Ghali (1992-1996) and Kofi Annan (1997-2006) were more ready to praise NGOs than to take real steps to strengthen their role. As the decade came to a close, governments and the UN bureaucracy grew increasingly wary of NGOs and their "activism." Governments of the global South, unused to civil society critics and nervous about their country's human rights record, were suspicious of NGOs, sometimes accusing them of being mouthpieces of the rich and powerful states of the North. Ironically Northern governments also grew wary of NGOs, who they suspected of favoring radical change and of promoting solidarity with the nations of the South. For the time being, though, NGOs remained in the ascendancy and most governments tried to work with them (and co-opt them if possible). More than ever, governments gave funding to NGOs and urged them to accept "partnerships," especially in the humanitarian sector where billions of dollars flowed into NGO coffers from government sources.

The UN as an institution tried to improve its work with NGOs, setting up "focal points" in many agencies and departments and inviting NGOs to briefings with senior officials. UN staff had various views of NGOs. The instrumentalists saw NGOs as implementers of UN projects and as disseminators of UN information and ideas. Others saw them as new governance "actors" who would have to be tolerated, accommodated and incorporated. Others saw NGOs as difficult and even dangerous – to be avoided whenever possible. Only a minority saw NGOs as Annan had framed them -- a source of inspiration and democracy. To the credit of Annan, in 1998 he assigned Assistant Secretary General Gillian Martin Sorensen, to work with NGOs and help solve their access problems and address other issues. She proved to be an effective mediator and problem solver, helping to offset some of the negative trends.

Positive Steps and Negative Trends

To provide openness towards newer Southern NGOs and flexibility towards worthy NGOs that were not international in scope, some delegations proposed revised rules for NGO accreditation. In 1993, a negotiating process got under way. (United Nations, 1993) Under the leadership of Ambassador Ahmed Kamal, ECOSOC finally approved in 1996 a new regime for NGOs that

widened their role and opened the door to influential national-level organizations for the first time. (United Nations, 1996a) A second ECOSOC resolution, passed at the same time, called for negotiations towards formal NGO relations with the General Assembly (United Nations, 1996b). GA accreditation, long an NGO goal, offered the possibility of far broader NGO activity than that offered by ECOSOC alone. Kamal tried to carry the momentum onward to that second negotiation in 1997, but in spite of great diplomatic skill, he did not succeed. Government opposition was simply too broad. This setback to NGO aspirations gave warning that serious problems lay ahead. Had the negotiations succeeded, NGOs might have strengthened the weak General Assembly and given it new dynamism, but governments were in a defensive mode and simply not ready to move the idea forward.

At about this time, UN security officials expressed increasing concern over the perceived threat posed by NGOs, especially at headquarters. Under pressure from the New York City Police Department and US federal security officials, UN security Chief Michael McCann began a series of moves that greatly impeded NGO passage through the perimeter security barrier. The security department closed the entrance at 42nd street to NGOs, required NGO screening through metal detectors at 45th street, and sought to limit the number of NGO-accredited interns. In 1999, the Secretary General's Chief of Staff, Iqbal Riza, issued a memorandum, closing off NGO access to the second floor of the Conference Building, where the Security Council and ECOSOC chambers have their main entrance. Most significantly, the floor was the location of the Delegates' Lounge, the choice location of NGO meetings with ambassadors and other diplomats.

The tone of Secretariat discourse on NGOs changed perceptibly. Officials now said that NGOs posed a security threat, that their numbers had grown "explosively," that the UN was "flooded" with NGOs and that something had to be done to control this multitude. Security officers seized NGO leaflets and accused NGOs of harassing diplomats, setting off a firestorm of criticism on the NGO side. The "new actors" were not as welcome as they had imagined. Sorensen managed to moderate the trend, by bringing NGO leaders into contact with McCann and his top security staff. But member states added to the negative environment, reacting defensively against human rights critics, environmental advocates, women's campaigners and other NGO activists.

The worst blow to NGOs access at this time was the UN's abandonment of the high-level conferences. The United States government, alarmed at the gathering worldwide criticism of globalization and neo-liberalism, led a sharp attack on the conferences as unproductive, expensive and pie-in-the-sky, with (Washington charged) little policy-relevance in the real world. The US Congress even passed legislation in 1996 threatening to restrict US membership dues to the UN if global conferences continued. Some other governments agreed, nervous that their own unpopular policy options might be challenged if future conference were convened. Annan and his team felt constrained to abandon the conference idea, even if this meant distancing the UN from the progressive NGO movements and the great energy and support they brought to the world body. Annan announced in 1997 that he would oppose any further conferences, though in fact several remained in the pipeline. The last major conferences of the 1990s tradition took place in 2002 - the "Financing for Development" Summit in Monterrey, the Summit on Aging in Madrid and the Johannesburg Summit on the environment. From that time forward, UN conferences would be much less frequent and far less ambitious - and the PrepComs would be short, infrequent and carefully crafted to keep NGO participation to a

minimum.

Civil Society Trends and Diversities

During the 1990s, as global civil society grew rapidly, there were new internal debates about what the movement comprised and what it stood for. These trends inevitably affected developments at the UN. Many traditional UN-associated international NGOs (like the Boy Scouts, the YMCA, or Rotary International) faced competition from new national and international NGOs, many based in the global South, as well as by grassroots movements of peasants, indigenous people and other claimants to a voice in global policymaking. The worldwide peasant movement, Via Campesina, founded in 1993, was an influential newcomer of this type. (Martinez-Torres, 2010).

To complicate matters further, rich governments increasingly made direct grants to humanitarian NGOs to fund development programs and emergency relief operations. This blurred the non-governmental line and exposed NGOs to influence and pressure from states, limiting NGO independence. Some such organizations, active at the UN, derived nearly all their revenues from government sources, raising questions about the meaning of civil society. Pressure on such NGOs to cooperate with controversial military operations (such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) only made matters worse.

As early as the Rio Conference in 1992, influential UN officials had tried to incorporate diverse “non-state actors.” The Rio declaration, “Agenda 21,” had established eight “major groups” as central to the follow-up architecture - farmers, indigenous peoples, local authorities, scientists, trade unions, women, youth and business. As the decade progressed, debates continued about who should be at the table and how representation should be organized. In this period of contestation, the term “civil society” came increasingly into usage – a term that seemed to fit the diversity of organizations and political movements. But conservatives found the term useful for different reasons. It could, after all, embrace claimants such as transnational corporations. In this way, the ideological stage was set for a corporate intrusion into the UN system, framed as a widening of democracy and a broadening of the global consultative process and justified with a corporatist model of representation.

Corporate Competitors: the Rise of the Global Compact & UN-Corporate “Partnerships”

In the 1970s, governments had sought to rein in the abuses of global companies by establishing a UN “Code of Conduct” and to begin a regime of global corporate regulation. They had set up the UN Center on Transnational Corporations in 1974 to advance this work. But after two decades of increasing hostility from the corporations and their powerful host countries, Secretary General Boutros Ghali shut the Center down in 1992. Secretary General Annan carried this even further, by promoting cordial relations and even “partnerships” with companies.

In June 2000, at a meeting attended by top managers of fifty global companies, Annan

announced a new “Global Compact” - a program to draw the corporations into the UN, encourage their good behavior and attract their support. The Compact was a nine-point plan to promote TNC self-regulation and “best practices,” devised by Annan’s team, including policy advisor, John Ruggie. They set up a new unit in the Executive Office to organize the Compact. Shortly, the UN began to organize conferences, meetings, and seminars about corporate social responsibility, some featuring CEOs of high-profile companies like BP, Daimler, Unilever, Deutsche Bank and Nike. (Paine, 2000)

Governments at this time were establishing “public-private partnerships” and actively seeking close relations with companies, arguing that the private sector was better and more efficient at providing public services. It was not surprising that the UN took this path. Corporate executives, on their side, saw advantages to their “brand” being identified with the UN’s image, a process that NGOs soon labeled “blue-wash” (whitewashing with the UN’s color blue). The Global Compact arose amid a wave of UN “partnerships” with private companies. Dozens of agreements of this kind were put in place in 1999 and 2000 and hundreds more were to follow.

In a time of financial crisis and budgetary constraint at the UN, corporate partnerships offered a source of new money for the cash-strapped world institution, while blue-wash flowed liberally. Corporate agenda-setting weakened NGO influence. The UN’s corporate tilt accelerated after the Seattle World Trade Summit (1999), when citizen protesters shook the policy elite. Similar grassroots challenges arose across the global political landscape, including tens of thousands of protesters at G-8 meetings and vast campaigns against privatization of water systems, public pensions, health care and other structural economic “adjustments.” (Paul, 1995; Larsen, 2011) Governments reacted with determination to rein in the civil society multitude, using militarized security measures, cordoned-off zones for official meetings, repression of peaceful protesters, and a general reduction of space for democratic discussion.

Progressive civil society leaders felt increasingly frustrated and their grassroots followers even more so. Global problems were accelerating, as the UN itself was constantly pointing out. Hunger, poverty and displacement were on the rise. The global economy was unstable and enormously unequal. States were “failing,” amid rising violence, warfare and intervention. (United Nations, 2004c) Yet governments were not responding. Instead, they were digging in and adopting conservative, defensive strategies. A growing body of civil society opinion saw the need for new venues of action, outside the state-dominated UN.

Substantial numbers of conservative and even right-wing NGOs appeared at the UN at this time. Previously, conservative movements had fervently disliked the world body for its global perspective and perceived threat to national sovereignty. For a half century they had stayed away. Now, they saw an opportunity to exercise their influence. Among others, the US-based National Rifle Association, a notorious weapons lobby, applied for and received UN accreditation. The right-wing cleric, Rev. Sun Myung Moon, began to exercise his influence through several newly-accredited NGOs under his control. Moon and his colleagues doled out large speaker fees, flattering awards and travel opportunities to naïve scholars, diplomats, and NGO leaders. Moon ingratiated himself with many, including senior diplomats, as he pursued right-wing goals. In 2000, he brazenly organized a mass wedding in a major UN conference room, to the great embarrassment of the Secretary General. (Paine, 2001).

Corporate-influenced or even corporate-created NGOs made an appearance at this time, following strategies advanced by Edelman Worldwide, a big New York-based public relations firm. In 2001, Edelman launched a series of “NGO seminars” to help business leaders learn about this new opportunity. Edelman told its clients that activists were “winning” because they were more aggressive in getting their message out to the public. Edelman argued that corporations should take the offensive, through “partnerships” with NGOs, challenges to NGOs, and even setting up new corporate-friendly NGOs when necessary. (Edelman, 2011)

Also at this time, many mainstream NGOs began to turn to corporate funders for financial support. They set up corporate advisory boards and adopted corporate methods of operation. They began to recruit their own top management from the ranks of the private sector. And they took up market-oriented activities quite distinct from their program work. NGO-branded credit cards came into widespread use as a source of finance. Discussions of “social entrepreneurship” arose. Many organizations began to sell products and services ranging from packaged tours to tee shirts and life insurance. In one extreme case, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) became a major provider of annuities, life insurance and health care insurance, with product-related income vastly greater than member dues. CEO pay in such prosperous NGOs rose accordingly. Conservative shifts in the policy posture of NGOs were hardly surprising under the circumstances.

Faith group politics at the UN were also changing swiftly. Women’s rights NGOs were shocked in 2000 to discover that an alliance of conservative Catholic, evangelical Protestant and Muslim organizations were building support for a conservative counter-attack on UN resolutions on reproductive health and women’s rights. (Butler, 2000) Many delegations responded positively to such new lines of advocacy. It was no longer possible to think of the NGO UN community as more-or-less united or homogeneous. The right was firmly asserting itself and it usually had lots of money and powerful friends.

Some delegations began to use the disputes as a means to discredit the NGO movement and to insist that NGOs were not only pursuing unpopular causes but divided and (most damning) *unrepresentative*. “Governments speak in the name of their peoples,” some diplomats insisted, “but NGOs are not elected and cannot really speak for anyone.” Such claims were disingenuous, since delegates knew very well that NGOs often speak for a very large number of citizens and may enjoy considerably more popularity and respect than governments. In spite of these challenges, the NGO movement held its ground.

The Cardoso Panel and “Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue”

Secretary General Annan sought to define a new set of relations between the UN and NGOs. To sort out the tangle of issues and bring NGOs into a moderating structure, Annan turned to a panel of “eminent persons.” In February 2003, without any prior consultation with NGOs, he named former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso to chair a panel that would consider the matter and come up with a definitive report. The SG named just two NGOs to the 12-member panel. Cardoso then appointed John Clark, a former staffer at the World Bank, as the committee’s executive secretary. The “Cardoso Panel” thus got off to a dubious start. Some said

it was visibly stacked against NGO aspirations. After lengthy consultations and deliberations, the panel eventually produced a document in June of 2004 (United Nations, 2004a).

The report recognized that there were serious problems in relations between NGOs and the UN. It noted that: "Difficulties and tensions have arisen, particularly in the deliberative process. Governments do not always welcome sharing what has traditionally been their preserve," continuing: "At the same time, many in civil society are becoming frustrated; they can speak in the UN but question whether anyone is listening, or whether their participation has any impact on outcomes." (United Nations, 2004a)

But the report showed scant understanding of the issues of most concern to civil society. Dozens of leading groups had outlined for Clark the key problems of physical and political access, which he largely ignored. NGO representatives had urged the panel to propose a return to global conferences and the appointment of a new high-level policy person in the office of the Secretary General to replace recently-departed ASG Sorensen. They had insisted that the UN publish its NGO rules and agree to consult with NGOs before changing rules in the future. They had asked for better financing for key NGO focal points and for NGLS. They had raised concerns about the UN's increasingly restrictive security environment. And they had argued that Southern NGOs must get a larger voice. All these and more were disregarded or given little attention. (Martens, 2004)

The report focused instead on a new paradigm - a "multi-constituency" or "multi-stakeholder" dialogue, a concept drawn from business management ideology of the 1980s. It was proposed as part of a broader move to re-position the UN as a place for discussion, not a scene of binding decision-making. Among those at the table would be local governments, parliamentarians, and (most significantly) the private sector. (United Nations, 2004a; Willets, 2006) Few were happy with the outcome and the NGO community was especially irked. Annan faced such a great outcry that he had to distance himself from the panel and produce his own hasty (much modified) report three months later. (United Nations, 2004b) The Cardoso Report had little life left when the General Assembly debated the topic in the fall. However, Annan and his team did not hesitate to put into practice many of Cardoso's basic concepts, especially the controversial idea of multi-stakeholder dialogue.

Communication Barriers: Digital Documents and (Malfunctioning) Earphones

The Cardoso Panel did have one significant accomplishment: UN provision of its digital documents to the NGO community and to the global public. The campaign for access to these documents had started in 1997, by a partnership of a dozen key NGOs. Again and again, the campaigners had asked Secretary General Annan to make UN documents universally available through the internet. Beginning in 1997, the UN had made these documents available to member states through a restricted internet portal. NGOs argued that with all the talk about "transparency," the UN should make the same portal open to all the world. UN officials complained that the organization did not have sufficient funding to meet this need (though it was producing thousands of copies of documents in print form at far greater cost). After dozens of NGO meetings and constant advocacy over seven years, the UN finally agreed to make its

document system available to all. Cardoso had supported NGOs on this issue and he deserves some credit for the new policy.

While the digital documents effort took seven years, the NGO struggle over earphones was never resolved. UN conference rooms, including the chamber of the Security Council, have galleries for the “public” where NGOs are invited to sit during important meetings. Earphones at every seat in these galleries allow those attending to hear translations of the official proceedings. The earphones were often not functioning (half or more of the units in the gallery would typically be out of service). NGOs working on Security Council matters were especially active in lobbying for an improvement in earphone functionality. But in spite of regular NGO requests to the Council, to the UN Secretariat and to individual delegations, the UN never fixed the earphones, making serious monitoring of the meetings difficult or impossible. The condition continued from at least the mid-1990s until the time of the Capital Master Plan renovations in 2010,³ symbolizing the lack of concern for basic NGO needs.

The War on Terror, the Multiple Crises and the World Social Forum

In the post-Cold War period, the UN had to cope with widening war and social instability, including the conflicts in Angola, Somalia, Former Yugoslavia, Palestine, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. The crisis was deepened by the events of September 11, 2001, which led to the global “War on Terror.” Governments adopted repressive and security-oriented tactics that set aside human rights protections and reflected a siege mentality. The UN as an institution was swept up into “counterterrorism” policy and local wars, worsened by the Iraq conflict of 2003 and beyond. Later in the decade, the “multiple crises” set in – the food, energy and climate crises, as well as the ominous economic and financial crisis. These emerging and interconnected crises evoked more civil society concern and they provoked more frustration with the lack of effective government action within the UN policy process.

NGOs could not sustain the enthusiasm and optimism that had been the hallmark of the global conference decade. Some influential groups felt that civil society should form its own alternative zone for policy reflection and action. This impulse, dating from the beginning of the new century, led several NGO leaders to found the World Social Forum, which met for the first time in Porto Alegre Brazil in January 2001. The Forum attracted a turnout of 12,000 activists and challenged the global system with newfound enthusiasm. Growing to 75,000 participants by 2011, the Forum continued to hold annual global gatherings as well as regional and local ones. It stimulated and energized, but it also failed to engage with – and transform – systems of power.

The GA Presidents’ Initiatives on NGO Access

Meanwhile, the UN continued to consider a more broadly-agreed framework for civil society participation. Some asked: how could World Social Forum energy be brought back into the UN? When senior Swedish diplomat Jan Eliasson took up the presidency of the General Assembly in September, 2005, he met with civil society representatives and promised that he would produce

³ The UN’s “Capital Master Plan,” a complete renovation of the entire UN headquarters campus, began preliminary construction work in 2008 and will continue through the end of 2014. Drastic space restrictions went into force when intergovernmental meetings shifted to the temporary North Lawn Building in 2010.

meaningful action in favor of expanded NGO rights. Eventually, in May 2006, he launched a consultation process to sound out member state opinions. NGOs made their views known, including the long-standing request for a consultative arrangement with the General Assembly and the need for an official in the Executive Office with an NGO portfolio. Most of all, civil society groups reminded the UN of the huge gap between the aspirations of the world's people and the static and difficult-to-access process of official negotiations.

Member states remained cool to such ideas. When Eliasson's term ended, he had made little real progress. Consultations in the General Assembly and other diplomatic efforts nonetheless continued. The GA President's office organized a conference with NGOs in the spring of 2007 to explore key issues. NGO submitted statements, wrote letters, lobbied friendly delegations. But member states were still not ready to move forward. Two years after Eliasson, it became clear that GA presidents could not make progress on the NGO file. By September, 2008, the initiative disappeared altogether from the GA agenda.

During this time, many governments were acting domestically to restrict and diminish civil society influence. One government after another passed laws to tighten government control over these groups. As the journal *Global Trends in NGO Law* summarized, there were: "restrictions on the formation, activities and operation of NGOs in comprehensive NGO framework laws; increasing restrictions on foreign funding to NGOs; [and] international cooperation laws that place prohibitions on NGO exchanges of knowledge, capacity and expertise across borders." (International Center for Non-Profit Law, 2009) For NGOs in the global South, these pressures were very serious and greatly diminished their capacity to work at the international level.

NGOs also faced a general decline in revenue, due to the financial crisis. Private donors had less money to give away and governments were cutting back on a wide range of grants and programs that had been outsourcing to NGOs. The data for a precise assessment is not available, but it seems that numerous NGOs simply disappeared in 2008 and after, while many others suffered substantial program and staff reductions. NGO capacity at the UN was complicated further by tightening UN security measures, by the squeeze on space created by headquarters renovation, and by further cuts in budgets of NGO focal points and support units, especially NGLS.

Paradoxically, while NGOs were denied access to the General Assembly itself, they continued to interact intensively with several of the GA's main committees, notably the First Committee (Disarmament) and the Third Committee (Human Rights). Some, like Amnesty International, used their worldwide presence to lobby governments in national capitals on policy positions at the UN and to bring advocates from local chapters to speak at "side events" and meet informally with delegates in New York and Geneva. Networks, such as the Global Call to Action on Poverty, proved adept at bringing strong delegations to UN events for focused advocacy at key moments. NGO interaction with Security Council delegations went forward robustly. And the tide of NGO participants at major meetings, though diminished from the global conference era, was still substantial. The overall number of accredited NGOs continued to rise – to well over 3,000.

In UN centers other than New York, the access picture was occasionally encouraging. In Geneva, NGOs' sustained strong engagement with the newly-formed Human Rights Council.

And in Rome, member states re-organized the Committee on World Food Security, incorporating an innovative “Civil Society Mechanism” with input that included the voices of peasant and fisher movements from around the world. (McKeon, 2009)

The NGO Access Groups

In New York, Geneva and Vienna, NGOs formed working groups in 2009 to advocate for further progress in access, to protest negative changes and to lobby for a deepened partnership with the UN. They have called public meetings and lobbied energetically. The New York group, composed of senior representatives, has met with high UN officials and top security personnel, consulted with senior staff at the Capital Master Plan, and communicated with the Secretary General. The NGOs have insisted on more commitment from the UN and they have made it clear that the problems include more than the details of day-to-day access – but also improved relations with citizen movements in every land.

Conclusion

Looking over the past sixty-five years, it is clear that NGOs have dramatically expanded their role in the policy process at the UN. But they still face many hurdles. Today, NGOs must cope with government conservatism, funding difficulties, and private sector pressure – while also confronting multiple global crises: rising hunger, climate change, and global economic instability. NGOs can draw strength, though, from emerging grassroots movements and global democratic openings such as the “Arab spring” and anti-austerity mobilizations. Citizen movements of many kinds are rising up to challenge official orthodoxies, build alliances across borders and search for real change. With the future shape of the global system in flux, the period is filled with uncertainty. There is a danger of social fragmentation and the possibility of repression. But NGOs may be able to seize the opportunities and make the most of them, as legitimacy-bereft governments find they must alter course in promising directions. If so, important new horizons may open up for NGOs – at the UN and beyond.

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