A Question of Political Will

The Helsinki Process Report
on Globalisation and Democracy

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On the 29th of June 2005 the Finnish government published the Helsinki Group Report, under the programmatic title 'Mobilising Political Will'. The report marks the first peak of the Helsinki Process on Globalisation and Democracy launched by the Finnish and Tanzanian governments in 2002. The two governments have an ambitious goal, comparing their initiative to the first Helsinki process in the 1970s, which at the time contributed to the resolution of the conflict between East and West. Now they hope the "2nd Helsinki Process" will help bridge the gap between North and South and "bring more democracy into international relations". Contrary to the first process the second one does not only represent an intergovernmental initiative. The title page of the Helsinki Report declares that "*[p]roblems of a truly global nature cannot be solved by states alone – solving them requires goal-oriented cooperation between all stakeholders".* Consequently the Helsinki Process takes a multi-stakeholder approach and involves a number of civil society and business representatives.

The group's report was deliberately released a few days before the G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, and was intended to influence discussions there as well as at the UN Millennium+5 summit in September 2005. It also forms the basis of the 2nd international conference of the Helsinki Process, which will take place in the Finnish capital from the 7th to the 9th of September. However, the report's remit extends beyond what is politically realisable in the short term this year. Its recommendations on the reform of global governance systems, in particular, will still remain relevant after the 2005 summits.

1   Background

In the last ten years, the concept of global governance that has increasingly prevailed in international political discourse has emphasised the significance of network structures involving state and private sector actors within international politics. Within this new paradigm, the future of international co-operation beyond traditional nation-state multilateralism is seen to be in public-private 'partnerships', or 'Global Public Policy Networks' involving various interest groups (the so-called 'stakeholders'). This approach, which is in fact dubbed a "multi-stakeholder approach", is based on the premise that governments cannot overcome growing global economic, social and ecological problems alone but are dependent on the co-operation of the private sector and of civil society.

The Helsinki process is based on this multi-stakeholder approach. It was initiated in 2002 by the Finnish and Tanzanian governments. Their collaboration was inspired by the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation, which had been set up in the same year by the ILO and which was co-chaired by the Presidents of Finland and Tanzania respectively.

The goal of this Helsinki Process was to bring together representatives from governments, civil society and business, in order to develop feasible, practical and strategic policy responses to the deficits of global governance. The 2000 Millennium Declaration of the United Nations formed its starting point.

The Finnish and Tanzanian governments' pursuit of alternative ways of solving global problems was motivated by the delay in realising the Millennium Summit declarations and by the repeated failures in negotiations on environment, development and trade policies at intergovernmental level. They deliberately invited representatives from civil society groups with controversial positions, to try and bridge oppositions and seek common ground through dialogue with each other.

It was with this intent that the "Helsinki Group" was founded in Autumn 2003, counting among its members 20 people from varying political and social backgrounds in addition to representatives from the Finnish and Tanzanian Foreign Ministries.

Normally, world commissions, like the recent High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, recruit their participants overwhelmingly from among the ranks of long-serving politicians and top international diplomats, who as a group embody a moderately progressive international mainstream. Within the Helsinki group, the spectrum of political positions was much wider and the involvement of representatives from civil society groups much greater than this. On the one hand the group boasted prominent voices from among those critical of globalisation, such as Susan George, Deputy President of Attac France, and Martin Kohr, director of Third World Network. On the other, Maria Livanos Cattaui, Secretary General of the ICC until June 2005, and Peter Sutherland, former Director General of the WTO and currently Chairman of BP and Goldman Sachs, represented two of world's most influential lobbyists for neo-liberal globalisation.[1] Further members of the group included

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[1] Sutherland, however, is also the one member of the Group who 'has declined to endorse the Report of the Helsinki Group due to disagreements with the text'.

Jean-Francois Rischard, Vice-President of the World Bank for Europe; Mary Robinson, the former Irish president; John Evans, the Secretary General of the Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC) of the OECD; Irene Khan, the Secretary General of Amnesty International; and Marta Suplicy, former Mayoress of Sao Paolo.

The group met four times between January 2004 and April 2005, before presenting its report in June 2005. Its work was supported by three further groups of experts, which were set up within the framework of the Helsinki process to cover the following thematic tracks:

• Track 1: New Approaches to Global   Problem-Solving

• Track 2: Global Economic Agenda

• Track 3: Human Security

The reports of the three Tracks formed the basis for part of the content of the Helsinki Report. In January 2005 these three reports were presented to the public simultaneously at the World Social Forum in Porto Allegre and at the World Economic Forum in Davos, this also being a symbolic attempt of the Finnish and Tanzanian governments to use the Helsinki Process to build a bridge between contradictory political discourses and actors.

2   Key Findings of the Report

The Helsinki Report is made up of 3 parts: first, a three-page declaration of the Helsinki Group; second, a list of political recommendations; and third, a 'Secretariat Backgrounder'. Added to this are the 30-50 pages of the detailed reports and recommendations of the three Tracks. The core of the Group Report is formed by the recommendations, which are divided into five 'baskets':

• Poverty and Development

• Human Rights

• Environment

• Peace and Security

• Governance

In this sense the report largely follows the structure of current debate at UN level, reflected for example in Kofi Annan's March 2005 Reform Report and in the Draft Outcome Document of the Millennium+5 summit. The one difference is that, contrary to the UN documents, in the Helsinki Report a whole chapter is set aside for the subject 'Environment'.

The Helsinki Report and the reports of the three expert panels contain numerous recommendations on the first four 'thematic baskets'. However, the reports for the most part do not present new initiatives, instead listing mainly suggestions already circulating in international discussion of the realisation of the MDGs and of ways to tackle threats to human security. These include the elimination of agricultural subsidies, further debt-relief, the doubling of ODA, the introduction of new development financing instruments, for example international taxes, and the fight against corruption. However, the suggestions most central to the report are those on the reform of global governance structures.

The Helsinki Group identifies a massive governance deficit in many areas of global politics, both in terms of accountability and policy coherence of governments and international organisations, and also in terms of the equal treatment of states and democratic participation in global decision-making processes. The Group thus supports proposals to create a new G20[2], of Heads of State and Government, in which representation of the largest industrial countries is balanced with representation of countries from the global south. The G20 would supplement or even fully replace the current G7/8. The Helsinki Process is in fact taking up an idea put into circulation a few years ago by the Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin. Martin now refers to the 'L20' (Leaders 20) to distinguish the new group clearly from the existing G20 of Finance Ministers and Reserve Bank Directors, and to indicate that the new group should be established at the highest political level.[3]

While the Helsinki Report leaves it at this general recommendation, the Track 1 Report makes the proposed character of a new G20 quite clear:

"A periodic summit of such an apex body of heads of State/Government could become an empowered committee designed to pursue globally agreed goals, rather than as a ruling "junta" setting rules and goals for everyone. Its focus should be on implementation, coherence and a sense of responsibility to the international community. Indeed, these leaders should be encouraged to view themselves as collective stewards of the world economy and ultimate overse-

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2   The Helsinki-Group more specifically proposes a "G-20+", in order to indicate that the exact number of countries involved could possibly be slightly greater than 20.

3   See Martin, Paul (2005): A Global Answer to Global Problems. In: Foreign Affairs 84(3), p. 2-6.

ers of the Bretton Woods institutions, WTO, and relevant economic and social agencies of the United Nations, which currently lack a collective structure of accountability to popularly elected representatives." [4]

The G20's legitimacy to act as 'collective stewards' of the world economy would depend very much on the way in which its membership was decided and on how this body was integrated into the United Nations system. In this context, the Track 1 Report mentions the possibility of rotating membership and of the participation of individual countries who in turn represent a group of countries. The report also suggests that in addition to the annual summits of Heads of State and Government in the G20, there should also be regular meetings of various groups of ministers (for example ministers for Trade, Finance of Environment). This would make clarification of the relationship between the G20 and the UN even more necessary, to avoid the risk that the G20 establishes an exclusive parallel system to the United Nations, heightening rather than tackling the current global governance deficits in equal treatment, accountability and participation of civil society. The Track 1 Report suggests a closer engagement with these and other unanswered questions as the Helsinki Process continues.

The Helsinki Group emphasises that the G20 suggestion only represents one element of necessary reforms to the global governance system. Beyond it, the report also supports the ILO World Commission's suggestion, which addresses the social dimension of Globalisation, of setting up a 'Globalisation Policy Forum'. This would continuously and transparently coordinate the work of the UN, the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWI) and the WTO. It does however remain unclear what relationship this Forum would bear to the suggested G20 or to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). In fact, ECOSOC itself is already supposed to perform precisely this function of coordinator and forum.

The Helsinki Group further demands fundamental reforms at the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO. The Track 1 Report collects a whole series of suggestions which address coherence and accountability as well as representativity and greater inclusion of civil society. Amongst other things the report supports demands for a reform in decision-making mechanisms at the IMF and

World Bank to help tackle under-representation of developing countries.

The Helsinki Group attaches great importance to increased participation of national parliaments in global economic management. Parliaments should both monitor and mandate the work of their Governments in international fora and also work together with each other more at an international level. To this end, it suggests the establishment of thematic 'global Policy Committees' under the umbrella of the UN, as proposed by the Cordoso panel. The Track 1 Report also supports the ILO World Commission's suggestion of creating a 'Global Parliamentary Group', which would occupy itself with the coherence and consistency of the global economic, social and environmental policies of the UN, the BWI and the WTO.

Finally, the Helsinki Group affirms the necessity of strengthening international co-operation in the areas of social policy, ecology and human rights. In this context the group adds its voice to the call for a new Human Rights Council and a World Environmental Organisation.

However, the main interest of the Helsinki Group's report does not lie primarily in its catalogue of recommendations on tackling all manner of global problems. The group itself makes clear that there is a lack not so much of suggested solutions, but of the necessary political mechanisms and will to translate these suggestions into reality.

In fact the most remarkable aspect of the report is the unanimity with which the 22 members of the Helsinki Group, as representatives of a broad political spectrum, encourage 'new coalitions' of state and non-state actors in order to solve global problems, thereby rejecting traditional Nation State multilateralism. At the core of the group's declaration is the proposal to form networks connecting governments and other players, which could mobilise the political will necessary to propel the global reform agenda. The Helsinki Process could, in its own view, provide the framework for such a network.

Concretely, the group suggests setting up a series of Round Tables on the most pressing relevant problems. These should be open to any interested relevant groups. The list of potential participants is long: governments, including representatives from national, regional and local government; international organisations; civil society organisations and movements; representatives from business; religious groups; trade unions; members of other world commissions; sci-

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[4]   Helsinki Process on Globalization and Democracy (2005b), p. 18.

entists; journalists; research institutions and think tanks. The individual Round Tables would lay down their own mandate and working practices. They would not replace but would provide an important supplement to existing international organisations.

"*Such Round Tables cannot replace legitimate institutions of democratic governance, but they can exercise real influence and provide value added to other processes that have the formal responsibility for implementing global reforms.*" [5]

This suggestion obviously borrows heavily from the ideas of Jean-Francois Rischard.[6] That all the other members of the Helsinki Group have evidently adopted his thinking is a clear indication of the breadth of support the multi-stakeholder approach currently enjoys in international political discourse. All the more important is a more intensive engagement outside academic circles with the legitimacy and effectiveness of this 'avant-garde' model of global governance.

3   Conclusions

For Susan George, herself a member of the Helsinki Group, the significance of the Helsinki Process lies less in the reports it has brought out so far than in the concept on which the Process is built. Rather than referring to the 'multi-stakeholder approach', she talks about the concept of 'variable geometry' in the solution of complex global problems.

"*In my view, variable geometry is the most useful political concept to emerge from the Helsinki Process. It is the recognition that no one institution, or type of institution, can solve by itself the problems we confront today.*"[7]

She argues for a co-operative network in which different non-state actors and movements can get over their 'turf wars' and work together.

Other members of the Helsinki Group evaluate the Process in similarly positive terms.[8] According to Mary Robinson, the Helsinki Process could adopt a bridging function in the dialogue between North and South over the next 20 years until 2025. The former British minister for development Clare Short, also a member of the Helsinki Group, is sceptical about the results of the work so far. But even she emphasises the political potential within the integrative approach of the Helsinki Process.

"*My view of the Helsinki Process is that neither the Declaration nor the reports of the tracks are important – although much of the work has been very useful. I agree with some but not all of it. But the coming together of governments, private sector and civil society from north and south has the potential to create great change. The test is whether the follow up to the reports creates a new space that enables people across the world to agree an agenda for progress and then whether people hold their governments to account.*"[9]

Yet the experiences of the Helsinki Process also show up the limits of such dialogue processes. Where representatives of business interests join critics of globalisation at the discussion table, the risk is great that their respective positions will mutually 'neutralise' each other. So it is small wonder that the Helsinki Group's suggestions in the areas of privatisation, debt relief and international taxes turned out to be 'rather too timid' for Susan George.

Even the initiators of the Helsinki Process feel there are limits to the political participation of non state actors at a global level. The Foreign Ministers of Finland and Tanzania emphasise that

"*The involvement of all stakeholders in various capacities in global decision-making processes, as such, does not solve the problem but it can help in highlighting where gaps and difficulties remain.*"[10]

The Helsinki Report is supposed, as its title suggests, to 'mobilise political will'. In the end, though, it is up to Governments and interna-

5   Helsinki Process on Globalization and Democracy (2005), p. 13.
6   Rischard has argued in various publications for the creation of multi-stakeholder groups as a solution to the 20 most pressing global problems. See for example Rischard, Jean-Francois (2002): High Noon: Twenty Global Problems, Twenty Years to Solve Them. New York: Basic Books
7   George, Susan (2005): Variable Geometry to Design Positive Outcomes. Personal Contribution to the Helsinki Process. Helsinki. (http://www.helsinkiprocess.fi/netcomm/ImgLib/24/89/hp_contribution_george.pdf)

8   See statements by individual participants on the Helsinki-Process website (www.helsinkiprocess.fi).
9   Short, Clare (2005): Potential to Create Great Change. Helsinki. (http://www.helsinkiprocess.fi/netcomm/ImgLib/24/89/hp_contribution_short.pdf)
10   Helsinki Process on Globalization and Democracy (2005), p. 6.

tional organisations to take up the recommenda- tions of the Helsinki Process, to confirm them, and to put them in to practice. To this end a group of 'Friends of the Helsinki Processes' have come together. The group includes the govern- ments of the following twelve countries: Algeria, Brasil, Canada, Egypt, Hungary, India, Malaysia, Mexico, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, and the United Kingdom. Its mandate is to carry forward the recommendations of the Helsinki Process at various international fora and to plan common strategies to do so. The UN General Assembly Millennium+5 Summit, which will take place from the 14th to the 16th of September in New York, presents the first opportunity to do this.

The Summit will reveal the extent to which gov- ernments take account of the Helsinki Process and of its recommendations to date, and what level of political status they accord to the report. Further opportunities will follow, as, contrary to the reports of other world commissions, the Hel- sinki Group's publication marks not the conclu- sion but merely the first climax of the Process. As the Finnish and Tanzanian governments con- clude their foreword to the report, "The Helsinki Process will continue".[11]

About the author:

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[11]   Ibid,.p. 9.

More Information is available on
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