

NGOs in the Multilateral System

The prominent presence of NGOs on the multilateral scene is evident in the more than 2,000 non-governmental organizations with consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN (ECOSOC), and the 1,400 that are linked to the Department of Public Information (DPI).⁸ Willingness to engage these NGOs and to actively seek out their involvement in multilateral processes is not yet universal among governments. In some cases it may be as simple as an aversion to public scrutiny, but in other cases it is also a genuine concern that already complex and difficult negotiations will only become more so with the introduction of a whole new sector of actors. Some worry about the challenges of managing diverse public views and expectations, and some worry that NGOs, while a considerable collective force, are not themselves sufficiently accountable to the constituencies they claim to represent.⁹

In spite of these reservations, however, it is probably fair to say that the prevailing assumption in the multilateral system is that NGOs are significant stakeholders in multilateral processes and represent significant strains of public opinion and concern, as well as expertise, and that multilateral policy making and implementation stand to be strengthened and made more representative, and thus will enjoy a greater measure of popular support, if NGOs are actively engaged throughout relevant multilateral processes.

Constructively facilitating and managing NGO involvement is a significant challenge, and the Secretary-General's report on UN reform notes that "the system that has evolved over several years for facilitating the interaction between the United Nations and civil society actors is showing signs of strain." Given the large numbers of NGOs now on the scene, not all can be accommodated within formal processes. That in turn implies the need to develop selection criteria by which NGOs can be accredited to particular events and forums, and "despite a substantial body of practice, non-governmental organizations wishing to attend and participate in United Nations conferences and meetings often encounter uneven standards and confusing procedures."¹⁰

But whatever the challenges, the Secretary-General emphasizes that the presence of NGOs in the UN system is longstanding and extensive and, by implication, that it will continue:

The relationship of the United Nations with civil society organizations is as old as the Charter itself. Partnership between the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations in the humanitarian and development areas has been the rule for decades. Indeed, the relationship is so close that, in many cases, non-governmental organizations participate in the planning processes of the United Nations at the country level.¹¹

The Charter and ECOSOC provisions

The active presence of NGOs in the multilateral system is, of course, rooted in the Charter. Article 71 of the Charter mandates the Economic and Social Council to "make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence." In furtherance of that mandate, ECOSOC resolution 1996/31 defines the "consultative relationship between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations."¹² Resolution 1996/31 rests on accumulated practice and experience of interaction with NGOs from the earliest days of the UN. Part IV of the resolution describes in some detail the interaction of NGOs, with consultative status, with the Council itself – how NGOs can propose items for the Council's agenda, their attendance at meetings, the

⁸ *Strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change*, Report of the Secretary-General (United Nations, General Assembly, September 9, 2002, A/57/387), para 138.

⁹ "One dilemma in dealing with NGOs is the issue of accountability. Unlike democratically elected governments, NGOs are generally not accountable to the wider public – only to their like-minded supporters. Their constituency is often only a portion of a greater public.... Government policies can be susceptible to an undue influence from unrepresentative but well-financed or vocal NGOs that punch well above their true weight. These NGOs might pressure governments into supporting or adopting undesirable policies." (Steffen Kongstad [Deputy Director General, Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway], "Special Comment," *Disarmament Forum* [UNIDIR, No. 1, 2002], p.4).

¹⁰ *Strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change*, Report of the Secretary-General (United Nations, General Assembly, September 9, 2002, A/57/387), para 139.

¹¹ *Strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change*, Report of the Secretary-General (United Nations, General Assembly, September 9, 2002, A/57/387), para 135.

¹² "Consultative relationship between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations," Resolution 1996/31, United Nations Economic and Social Council (49th plenary meeting, July 25, 1996).