

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs) AND ACCESS TO THE UN

At its 1997 session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 52/453 in which the Secretary-General was requested to prepare a report on: (a) existing arrangements and practices for the interaction of NGOs in all activities of the UN system; (b) the legal and financial implications of modifications in the current arrangements for NGO participation with a view to enhancing their participation; and (c) the question of the participation of NGOs from all regions, in particular from developing countries. The report of the Secretary-General to the 1998 General Assembly (A/53/170) contains information on, *inter alia*: institutional arrangements, a growing operational partnership, building bridges between civil society and the UN, participation of NGOs from all regions, and enhancing the participation of NGOs in all areas of the UN system.

The report recalls that in 1948 there were 41 NGOs in consultative status; in 1968 there were 377 and at present some 1,350 NGOs have consultative status. In 1968 there were 200 NGOs associated with the Department of Public Information and, at present there are more than 1,500 such organizations. The report also notes that NGOs collectively constitute the second largest source of development assistance and recalls that, in December 1997, the Nobel Academy recognized the role of NGOs in the Ottawa process which led to the adoption of the Convention banning anti-personnel landmines. The report cited these facts to illustrate the universal movement towards greater citizen action, sometimes described as the "global associational revolution", which has characterized the past few years. The report then states that the growing influence and role of non-state actors has been both a hallmark and a cause of the changing international environment and that NGOs are the clearest manifestation of what is referred to as "civil society" — i.e., the sphere in which social movements organize themselves around objectives, constituencies and thematic interests. Other actors in the process are noted as including local authorities, mass media, business and industry leaders and the research community, including academia and think-tanks.

Commentary on the relationship and institutional arrangements between the UN and NGOs refers to the review that was conducted in the early 1990s and resolution 1996/31 of the Economic and Social Council in which three categories of status for NGOs was established: general consultative status for large, international NGOs whose area of work covers most of the issues on the Council's agenda; special consultative status for NGOs that have special competence in a few fields of the Council's activity; and the Roster, for NGOs whose competence enables them to make occasional and useful contributions to the UN's work and which are available for consultation upon request. The report notes that NGOs

have been particularly involved in the work of some of ECOSOC's subsidiary bodies, including the Commission on Human Rights, the Commission on Sustainable Development, the Commission on the Status of Women and the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. It notes that, while there are no formal arrangements for NGOs to participate in the work of the General Assembly, practice has evolved to allow a certain degree of informal participation in the work of the Assembly's Main Committees and several of its subsidiary bodies.

The UN's relationship with NGOs is managed by the NGO Section of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the NGO Section of the Department of Public Information. Over the years, most substantive departments have appointed one or several NGO liaison officers to facilitate access by NGOs to the UN and improve communications between officials in these departments and NGO experts in the relevant fields. The report refers to the Secretary-General's 1997 report, "Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform" (A/51/950), in which the Secretary-General called for all departments that had not yet done so to designate an NGO liaison officer. As well, the majority of UN funds, agencies and programmes have received a clear mandate from their governing bodies to work with NGOs and have developed a wide range of mechanisms to do so.

Consideration of the operational partnership between the UN and NGOs notes the strengths and assets brought to the work by NGOs, including, *inter alia*: local accountability; independent assessment of issues and problems; expertise and advice; important constituencies; provision and dissemination of information; and awareness-raising. The constraints or potential difficulties which limit the scope of UN collaboration with NGOs are noted as including: the sheer number of organizations and their diversity; their occasional organizational weaknesses; the fragility of certain grass-roots organizations; and the sometimes divergent positions among NGOs and between NGOs and governments. The report also notes that over-dependence on external financing can sometimes undermine the sustainability and even independence of NGOs. Despite these constraints or difficulties, the report states that the balance remains overwhelmingly favourable to a strengthened cooperation between the UN system and NGOs in operational matters, at Headquarters and in the field.

The report notes that the range of operational collaboration with NGOs actually goes beyond fund-raising and programme delivery to cover activities such as research and information outreach, policy dialogue and advocacy. The report states that through policy dialogue and advocacy NGOs have played a very significant and helpful role by establishing bridges between the UN and civil society at large. Referring to the world summits and conferences hosted by the UN in the 1990s, the report notes that while NGOs neither hosted nor organized these gatherings, their involvement in the process of collective analysis of the economic and social fields on these occasions reached