

Approaches to Enhancing NGO Participation in the Multilateral System

The foregoing review of NGO involvement in the multilateral system indicates that in those forums in which NGO access is welcomed, a fairly clear pattern of involvement is emerging. The Secretary-General's report on strengthening the UN characterizes this emerging NGO involvement as extensive and enriching:

The extensive interaction of civil society actors with the intergovernmental processes is of more recent vintage. It has really blossomed with the world conferences of the past decade. The formal deliberations and decisions of many such meetings are now often enriched by the debates carried out in non-governmental forums and events help in parallel with official conferences. Many United Nations treaty bodies now routinely consider alternate reports from non-governmental organizations alongside the official reports from Governments. In some cases, non-governmental organizations have addressed plenary sessions of conferences and participated in formal, round-table discussions with governmental delegates. Many Governments now include civil society representatives in their delegations to international conferences and special sessions, and sometimes also to the General Assembly.²⁷

Given that growing level of NGO engagement, on the one hand, and the less than uniform mode of involvement, on the other hand, NGOs have sought to develop a standardized minimum level of access to these various forums. The International NGO Task Group on Legal and Institutional Matters (INTGLIM), coordinated by the New York World Federalist office, has written to UN member states to propose a resolution which would formalize what they regard as "modest" consultative arrangements for NGOs to the General Assembly. The arrangements proposed are those described in ECOSOC Res 1996/31 (above), affirming the "consultative" role of NGOs, as distinct from the "negotiating role" which remains that of states and international organizations.²⁸

The NGO proposal would grant NGOs (those linked to ECOSOC and others according to procedures established in ECOSOC 1996/31) consultative status with the General Assembly, and makes three basic requests:

- I. that the Secretary-General "ensure appropriate seating arrangements and facilities for obtaining official United Nations documentation" for NGOs during open meetings, and "make provisions for NGOs at open meetings to make available their written contributions";
- II. that the General Assembly and "its Main Committees, Special Sessions and subsidiary and ad hoc Bodies develop further ways and means to improve their substantive interaction with non-governmental organizations, inter alia, through consultations, dialogues, panel discussions, and, as appropriate, oral and written statements by NGOs";
- III. that the Secretary-General explore ways and means by which NGOs from all regions, "particularly from the developing countries," can participate in the work of the UN.

The proposed GA resolution would codify NGO participation across the UN system in accordance with ECOSOC 1996/31, and encourage improved access along the following lines:

- I. appropriate seating arrangements for NGOs;
- II. facilities for obtaining official documentation;
- III. facilities to make the written statements of NGOs available to the delegates;
- IV. encourage the General Assembly and "its Main Committees, Special Sessions and subsidiary and ad hoc Bodies" to develop further ways and means to improve their substantive interaction with non-governmental organizations, e.g.:
 - consultations,
 - dialogues,
 - panel discussions;

²⁷ *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 136.

²⁸ As indicated in Article 71 of the Charter, and para 50 of the ECOSOC resolution noted above.