

unprecedented levels and led to an important breakthrough in the perception by UN officials and states alike of the role of NGOs, which are no longer seen only as disseminators of information, but as shapers of policy and indispensable bridges between the general public and the intergovernmental processes. NGOs participating in the conferences also provided: technical input and expertise on the issues under consideration; a linkage between the national and international deliberations on the issues, thereby enlarging the transparency of the process and the accountability of actors involved; an interested and informed constituency, at both the international and national level, for the implementation and monitoring of the results of the conferences; and ongoing work with national governments towards the implementation of the agreements reached and decisions taken at the conferences.

In the section dealing with the participation of NGOs from all regions, the report notes that the collaboration between NGOs and UN agencies and programmes, in particular in operational matters, involves a great number of organizations based in developing countries. These NGOs participate either as beneficiaries of projects or as full partners. As UN activities continue to be decentralized and programmes, funds and agencies are increasingly defined at the country level, the participation of local and national NGOs is likely to expand further in the years to come. The report states that efforts to promote the role and participation of NGOs from developing countries must first concentrate on facilitating the emergence of such organizations and on building their capacity to work effectively with the UN. Other points noted included: the NGO Unit of the World Bank has developed a programme to give best practice advice on NGO law, aimed at assisting governments and other parties to analyse the weaknesses of existing laws and to draft more appropriate ones; other UN programmes engaged in capacity-building for national NGOs provide technical assistance to strengthen technical, legal, training and managerial capacities of NGOs; lack of financial means and inadequate access to relevant information have also prevented southern-based NGOs from contributing as much as northern-based NGOs to the policy dialogue conducted in UN forums; national NGOs now account for the majority of applications for consultative status; and the need will soon arise, as an increasing number of organizations from developing countries seek consultative status with ECOSOC and other UN bodies, for specific arrangements and mechanisms to assist them in making proper use of this status.

On the question of enhancing the participation of non-governmental organizations in all areas of the UN system, the report states that the NGO sector constitutes a very diverse institutional category with significant variations with respect to size, resources, impact, methodology, objectives and approach to international organizations. In order for the UN to interact better with these

organizations and to continue to cooperate with them in a mutually beneficial relationship, it needs to learn more about this complex and expanding universe. Points made on this question include: efforts must be made to harmonize existing databases on NGOs so as to facilitate the exchange and compilation of information on NGOs across the UN system; the UN must attempt not only to draw a composite picture of the NGO community but also to provide its staff with the tools to deal with their fast-growing number; staff assigned to work with NGOs must be the primary recipients of any training programmes specifically dedicated to cooperation with civil society; the procedures and policies governing relations with NGOs (currently set out in the Secretary-General's Bulletin ST/SGB/209, 21 December 1984) will be updated and also serve to improve consistency in the Secretariat's relations with NGOs; it is imperative that all officials concerned share their experiences and best practices so as to promote coherence and efficiency in dealings with civil society while ensuring a proper implementation of existing mandates and rules; it is crucial that NGO access to information and documentation be secured in a timely and appropriate manner; bearing in mind the financial and legal constraints under which the UN operates, and the fact that NGO demands for prompt and comprehensive information cannot always be adequately satisfied, states may wish to consider a number of measures which could remedy, at least partially, this situation.

Some measures states could take to secure access and information for NGOs were outlined, including: setting aside a number of seats in an appropriately designated area of the General Assembly Hall during public debates on items in the social or economic fields; facilitating access to the Assembly's official documentation without any additional financial expense on the part of the Secretariat; reviewing the current "charge-back" funding of the UN's Optical Disk System (ODS) in order to allow for wider dissemination of the information and products available through it; and establishing a trust fund to facilitate the participation of NGOs from developing and least developed countries, and countries in transition, in UN activities.

At the 1998 session, the General Assembly adopted by consensus a resolution on the question of the NGO access (A/53/L.68). The Assembly recalled previous resolutions and requested the Secretary-General to: (a) seek the views of Member States, members of the specialized agencies, observers and intergovernmental organizations, as well as the views of non-governmental organizations from all regions, on his report (A/53/170); and (b) submit a further report to the General Assembly, at its 1999 session, taking into account the submissions received. The GA decided to continue consideration of the question at its 1999 session.

