



**The role NGOs play in making the United Nations accountable  
Engagement workshop at the CIVICUS World Assembly  
Glasgow, May 2007**

The purpose of the workshop, which was organized by the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS), was to explore the relationship between the United Nations and NGOs and how that relationship can be important in promoting increased UN accountability and global participatory governance. The workshop was attended by 13 participants representing organizations from Asia, Europe and Latin America.

**Global participatory governance**

Despite the progress made over the past twenty years in democratizing and making more accountable the organizations of global governance such as the UN, there is still much to be done. NGOs and CSOs have a hugely important role to play in that respect, as they can contribute to finding new ways of global governance that are democratic and accountable, fair and equitable.

NGLS Deputy Coordinator **Ms. Elisa Peter** introduced the topic of the workshop and noted that while the legitimacy and credibility of NGO presence at the UN is now fairly well established, NGO participation and role in intergovernmental decision making processes remains contested. She also reminded participants of some of the most important milestones in the ever evolving relationship of the UN system with civil society, from the inception of the Organization in 1945 until today. She noted that new forms of governance are emerging and that the UN is now more socially accountable than it was at its inception (i.e. to a wider constituency than its own membership). She ended by underlying the role of NGOs as intermediaries between global intergovernmental deliberations and realities at the national level and as actors who can link national experiences and situations with global governance issues and practices.

**The UN and civil society at the national level**

**Ms. Renee van de Weert**, UNICEF Senior adviser Child Survival, highlighted the important role of NGOs as local whistle blowers in emergency situations. She gave examples of how NGOs successfully drew media attention to the issue of child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which in turn led the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights to start an investigation into the issue. Another example she gave was the role of *Action contre la Faim* in raising awareness about malnutrition in Darfur and mobilizing UNICEF in the region. She also acknowledged that often times

UN agencies have an “outsourcing” type of relationship with civil society organizations, who are seen primarily as service delivery contractors rather than full partners. She noted that it was extremely important to meaningfully engage NGOs in the full project cycle, from the needs assessment phase to the implementation and monitoring phases, in order to take full advantage of the respective strengths of the UN and of civil society groups. The on-going UN reform in the area of humanitarian assistance may prove to be a useful exercise in this respect, as long as humanitarian NGOs are willing to engage in the process. Ms. Van de Weert ended by noting that global humanitarian governance is changing in a radical manner as large private foundations such as the Gates foundation, the Clinton initiative or GAVI have entered the sector and are able to provide billion of dollars in emergency assistance. The UN needs to reflect on its evolving role and significance.

**Mr. Rustam Ibrahim**, chairman of the Indonesian working group on CSO accountability, started his remarks by noting that the UN had played a significant role as a generous donor agency during the economic crisis in Indonesia through UNDP. Also in the aftermath of the Tsunami, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance proved crucial in helping to mobilize funds from donor countries. However, in this particular instance, there was a gap between the pledges announced and the realized funds which led to some frustration among the local civil society groups and the affected populations. Information, transparency and open communication channels are very important in order to improve the accountability of global institutions, and so is the participation of affected populations in the decision making and planning processes (which will increase downward accountability). It is also important that the UN recruits local staff that has expertise and knowledge of the local context in which the operations are taking place.

### **The UN and civil society at the intergovernmental level**

**Mr. Vicente Garcia Delgado**, CIVICUS liaison to the UN, talked of political involution and cultural evolution in the context of market globalization. He noted the democratic deficit of the UN, which is still very much under the control of the 5 permanent member states of the Security Council. He also noted that only the executive branches of the worlds’ governments were represented at the UN and the intrinsic elitist nature of the system. He referred to the current global campaign to establish a world parliamentary assembly at the UN and re-asserted the importance of civil society in transforming the existing structures of global governance into democratic, participatory and accountable institutions and stressed the urgency of those much needed fundamental reforms.

**Mr. Jem Bendell** consultant and writer of the NGLS development dossier on NGO accountability recapped some of the ideas that had been expressed during the workshop on how to make global institutions more accountable, including the establishment of an Ombudsman position at the UN and the creation of a parliamentary assembly. He also noted the importance of involving local governments and authorities in systems of global governance. He reminded participants that NGOs have always been putting issues on the agenda of the UN, from the mainstreaming of language on human rights in international

law, to the creation of the tripartite structure of the ILO (which includes labour unions in its governance structure) to the inclusion of NGOs on the governing body of UNAIDS. He noted that NGOs have always acted in “loyal opposition” to the UN, bringing constructive criticism to better the institution. Although NGOs have had breakthroughs on the “soft” policy issues (social and cultural), it has proven much harder for civil society to have an influence on the “hard” policy issues (peace and security). He acknowledged the fact that governance is becoming more multi-layered and multi-layered. He warned that more NGO involvement in the UN may also mean more lobbying by minority interests with conservative agendas, leading to a reflection of the nature of civil society as a whole, and the various shades it can have from corporate to semi-governmental organizations. He ended his remarks on the role of international civil servants in promoting NGO participation at the UN, and noted that some lacked the political courage necessary to open up the institution. When questioned about how to assess NGO accountability Mr Bendell identified five areas:

- 1- be given a mandate by those who are affected by the action of the organization
- 2- have expertise in the subject at hand
- 3- have relevant experience in the matter at hand
- 4- operate in a moral context
- 5- diversity

Additional resources:

- NGLS development dossier on NGO accountability (chapter 3 – on NGO accountability and global governance and the UN system, NGOs and accountability)
- NGO accountability – Politics, principles and innovation, edited by Jordan, L. and Van Tuijl, P.
- UN Accountability Issues and the Role of NGOs and Global Civil Society: A quick sketch paper by Hill, T. and Peter, E.