

## The United Nations and civil society

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This moment, with global attention focused on the limitless violence that international terrorism can unleash, is critical one for the UN. Either it will finally fulfil its role of maintaining international peace and security, or it will become obsolete. To be successful in this endeavour, we need to see better use of UN conflict prevention and conflict resolution mechanisms, good faith application of UN principles regarding sustainable development, and respect for the concepts of accountability, transparency and accessibility. Whether the UN can respond to this challenge depends on the trust UN Member States bestow the organization and on the support the UN receives generally from the world at large and specifically from active members of civil society who seek to promote peace and security through their own work.

Among the most crucial supporters of better use of the UN are the civil society representatives specifically chosen by UN-recognized non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Their voices are crucial not only for bringing to the attention of the UN information and analysis it might not otherwise receive through its regular channels, but also for publicizing and interpreting the work of the UN to other sectors of global civil society. Even among advocates of alternatives to war, the role and potential of the UN are often overlooked, beyond an occasional token reference to 'strengthening the UN' that lacks any substantive explanation. The governmental and non-governmental members of the UN community have the task of completing this concept and conveying it to the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, the reaction at UN headquarters in New York on the local level to the events of 11 September suggest that there is still a long way to go before the importance of NGO work is understood and appreciated. At a time when the UN especially needed to demonstrate cooperation and confidence-building on the basis of shared values and vision, it reflexively and categorically excluded a dedicated volunteer corps of goodwill ambassadors. Along with the 'general public', NGO representatives were barred from the UN for nearly a month following the events of 11 September 2001. Despite this, NGOs continued to argue the relevance and accessibility of the UN even when they could not actually access crucial information or interact with government delegates, some of whom depend heavily on non-governmental sources for information and analysis.

No single department or agent can be faulted for this exclusion or, generally, for the complexity of the processes that often result in NGOs falling between the cracks of the UN system. Almost four weeks passed before NGO access was returned to 'almost normal'. The delicate negotiations that restored NGO access involved the United Nations Security and Safety Service, the UN Secretariat and NGOs, all of whom actually wanted to restore access. During this time, once again NGOs tried

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to emphasize and demonstrate their role as partners and as 'part of the solution', not part of the problem. We had to underscore that we fully support local security measures for the UN—would we want access to a building that is a potential and visible terrorist target without wanting it to be secure?—and remind the authorities that our work makes the UN function better. Our access was restored the same time general public access resumed.

This experience as a whole is both symbolic and symptomatic. It raises questions and doubts whether the talk about civil society participation in the work of the UN is more than just diplomatic lip service. It also suggests that despite the complex and often excruciating process NGOs endure to become fully accredited by the UN, they are still seen as part of the outside world in a moment of crisis.

### *The nature of civil society*

The civil society that has emerged and evolved around the UN spans a wide range of interests, expertise, experience, professions and competencies. In fact, the term 'NGO' is offensive to some, and there is no question that it limits the idea and nature of popular transnational interaction, but it is our designation under UN Charter Article 71. The Charter, incidentally, defers in the extreme to states, specifically the government of any national organization, on the question of recognizing non-state bodies, particularly NGOs operating within the state. In other words, a state can block the recognition by the United Nations of an NGO because it does not like what that NGO does at home, such as promoting democratic practice or human rights.

Non-governmental actors are not a homogenous group. They often disagree among themselves on priorities, substance and tactics but have to cooperate if any are to be heard. For example, in some circles the term 'civil society' has come to include the business sector—a group of interests often at odds with human rights, sustainable development and environmental NGOs. These days non-governmental participants in a UN forum might have diametrically opposing interests or values. On matters of energy, for example, environmentalists and industry sit side-by-side as observers, though sometimes the latter have better access to diplomats, both formally and informally. On the issue of children and health, environmental health interests had to be addressed separately in order to circumvent the deadlock created by some NGOs insisting that overall health recommendations for children incorporate their position opposing abortion.

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Despite these differences, the superhuman skills of negotiation, compromise and cooperation that NGOs have developed can only benefit—and perhaps even serve as an example to—the greater UN community, including Member State governments, agencies and staff. For example, at the July 2001 conference on illicit trade in small arms, hundreds of NGO representatives had about one week to negotiate division of time and topics for a three-hour timeslot to address the conference. The forty chosen speakers embodied the most fundamental disagreements about life, death and use of force, and even among groups with common values, the range of priorities was vast and complex. But the community organized itself to divide the time, coordinate the topics, and even produce an edited compendium in time for the presentations.

Another example is a three-day meeting to facilitate entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), the outcome of a four-decade pursuit whose future now hangs in

the balance. The civil society that made this vision a concrete possibility was given five minutes to make a presentation to the conference. Although this effort is now at a stage where progress depends more on governments, NGO voices—because of their experience and expertise—can and should contribute. Unfortunately, NGO interest on this issue is a small fraction of what it was in past decades, in part because of the perceived inaccessibility of the process and ineffectiveness of the NGO role at this stage.

### *Modalities of NGO access*

All NGOs working with the United Nations are vetted through a long, laborious, highly political and bureaucratic process. To be recognized by the UN, an NGO must apply for accreditation with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) or the Department of Public Information (DPI). NGOs are required to meet rigid criteria, dealing with their internal decision-making structures, funding sources, and how long the NGO has existed. An application for accreditation includes a questionnaire, a summary and supporting documents. Completed ECOSOC applications, for example, are first screened and then submitted to the biannual Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations. The Committee considers each application and makes a recommendation. The Committee's recommendation is then submitted to the next ECOSOC meeting for final approval. The process can take years. Once recognized and accredited, NGOs must regularly renew their status or, in the case of ECOSOC consultative status—the most sought after level of accreditation because of the greater access granted—submit a quadrennial report detailing the NGO's activities in support of the UN.

Without such accreditation, NGOs do not have access to the UN grounds on a daily basis and cannot attend even open meetings. A separate mechanism—which varies by issue and agency involved—allows specialized NGOs to apply for accreditation to a specific UN conference or meeting, and only for that occasion. These NGOs tend to be focused on a particular topic and are not generally interested in the work of the UN as such. It is only through ECOSOC or DPI accreditation that NGOs can follow and participate in the ongoing work of the UN, and even then the access is circumscribed. Despite the fact that the accreditation process is long and tedious, NGOs accept it to be able to work in cooperation and support of the UN.

### *NGO = Not Governments Only*

So why do NGOs continue to support the work of the UN, while at the same time battling for an accepted voice and role within it? Many believe that the UN has not yet had a fair chance to fulfil its vision, but that it was honestly designed to provide a system capable of maintaining international peace and security. The UN Charter offers a solid but somewhat flexible statutory foundation. The vision of a regime for international peace and security implicit in the UN Charter rests on formal structures and mechanisms and explicit rules and principles, as well as intangible elements such as cooperation and good faith. Other factors, such as accountability and transparency of state action, and the extent to which states enable non-governmental participation, though hard to quantify, are essential for implementation of the UN security vision. This holds for work directly related to security—such as disarmament—and for work that addresses the root causes of suffering and conflict—such as development.

NGO support for the UN is really support for the vision of a world where conflict is addressed through debate and dialogue rather than force and threat. Non-governmental representatives may

often disagree with Member States. In fact, some government representatives see that as our proper role. But the more open and honest this disagreement, the better the chances of resolution or at least of finding shared objectives and alternative approaches. In this effort, governments can be allies or obstacles. Admittedly, the same is true for NGOs. We are not of one voice, and we do not always practice peace among ourselves. Still, our participation is crucial if the Charter vision is to be translated into reality and implemented on the ground.

Whether the UN is flexible enough to respond to the changes and crises it is confronted with today will determine its survivability and relevance. Non-governmental participation ensures flexibility and adaptability in the pursuit of UN objectives or the application of recommendations. The specialized expertise of some NGOs, the field experience of others, the cultural and communal context of many local groups who have never even heard of ECOSOC or DPI accreditation—all these are critical to accomplishing the tasks identified by the UN as necessary for the pursuit of peace and security.

Implementation of the UN vision is shaped by power politics and as such is also a measure of the global capacity to identify and pursue common long-term interests. The experience, knowledge, skills and commitment of non-governmental supporters of the UN system are wide-ranging and instructive. The international community and the UN itself deserve to benefit from these assets.

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The Nobel Peace Prize that Kofi Annan and the UN just received is a tremendous show of faith and hope on the part of the international community. In its fifty-six years the UN has accumulated a vast knowledge, as well as the skills to learn the hard lessons of its failures and receive constructive criticism from outside—not only from within—with humility and a willingness to adopt and adapt to change. If this experiment in coordinated global security and survival is to succeed, it must be in tune with the pulse of the international community in as many ways as possible. To be innovative and responsive, to stay in harmony with popular aspirations, the UN needs ongoing renewal through new voices and constant contact with civil society, including non-governmental representatives.

## Conclusions

Members of the UN non-governmental community know better than anyone the deep, dark, undiplomatic secrets of the UN, the embarrassingly redundant procedures and protocols, and the trials and tribulations that well-meaning and good-faith government delegates endure to promote human well-being. NGOs are the lowest of the entities the UN recognizes, and we know the gap between process and substance in implementation of UN values even better than governments and UN staff do. But we have learned the tools of diplomacy as well, and we do not openly discuss this gap. In fact we defend the UN to cynics and challenge the image conveyed by a cop in a recently televised NY-based crime drama: 'The UN? I thought all those guys know how to do is double park!' We could tell that cop some stories, but instead we would defend the dignity and importance of the UN, as long as we still believe the UN is working to address the world's needs, and as long as it is allowing us to do our work.