



Resolution on NGO Participation Continues to Gain Support

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"...for the moment, the involvement of NGOs in United Nations special sessions and conferences is negotiated case-by-case. It is a time- and resource- consuming exercise. I believe that the diversity of civil society should not stop us from exploring general, system-wide guidelines and harmonizing common practices and models."

From a key note address by UN General Assembly President Harri Holkeri to the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the United Nations (CONGO), Vienna, November 6, 2000.

What is to be the role of independent non-governmental organizations within the United Nations system? This question continues to be asked again and again, from one grey UN conference room to another.

In our continuing effort to press for consultative arrangements for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) within the UN General Assembly, the World Federalist Movement has been tracking the various negotiations for NGO participation in General Assembly convened global conferences, special sessions and other events. What we are finding is that these negotiations occur again and again, sometimes being carried over from one Preparatory Commission (PrepCom) session into the next, but then finally coming back to the same language applied in prior instances. These deliberations are largely due to the fact that each time the Preparatory Commission consists of a new set of government delegates unfamiliar with existing precedents for NGO participation from prior meetings.

In the meantime, some governments are able to use the issue of NGO participation as a political negotiating tool. For instance, in the second and third Preparatory Commission meetings for the Conference on Illicit Trade in Small Arms, agreement on the rules of attendance for NGOs was held up by a few member states. NGOs reported that a number of governments made strong off-the-record statements supporting NGO participation, but said they did not want to derail the discussion at hand by taking time to argue the issue.

The General Assembly is the central policy-making body of the UN including practically every major treaty and convention. The General Assembly is also the convenor of almost all of the world's major conferences and "Special Sessions" on topics of concern to both NGOs and the world community. One such example is the upcoming Special Session on HIV/AIDS planned for the beginning of June 2001. However, because the UN Charter only granted NGOs "consultative status" with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), language for NGO participation in General Assembly convened events must be rewritten each time. Additionally burdensome for both the UN Secretariat and NGOs is that once the language for participation is agreed upon, NGOs have to reapply for their organization's accreditation.

It is for this reason that the WFM Secretariat, in our capacity as convenor of the International NGO Task Group on Legal and Institutional Matters (INTGLIM), has drafted the **UN General Assembly NGO Resolution**. The proposed resolution has been written in consultation with hundreds of NGOs from both the North and South. It establishes minimum standards for NGOs' participation based on precedents from the past five global conferences. The General Assembly NGO Resolution would insure that NGOs are invited to participate in General Assembly convened events, including conferences and Special Sessions. It would also formally establish the right for accredited NGOs to attend General Assembly open meetings, receive General Assembly documentation, and be able to make available their reports and written documents. Such is current existing practice, however, because NGOs have no ongoing rights in the context of the General Assembly, modalities for NGOs' participation are granted on an ad hoc basis and must be renegotiated each time. In essence, the General Assembly NGO Resolution merely calls for formally recognizing 55 years of existing practice of civil society participation in the work of the General Assembly.

With the passage of the General Assembly NGO Resolution, discussions could move from the old question of whether NGOs will be invited, to focus on questions surrounding how NGOs will participate. Such discussions could lead to more fruitful and innovative strategies for NGO participation, for example, through panel discussions or round tables.

Now is a particularly appropriate time to establish a baseline for NGO status with the General Assembly. The UN is entering into a series of ten year review conferences of the global conferences of the 1990s (i.e. the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing). Already, time was wasted this April during the first PrepCom for the follow up to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio. During the Earth Summit+10 PrepCom the Group of 77 developing countries called for revisiting procedures for NGO participation, and suggested NGOs accredited to the Commission on Sustainable Development would have to reapply for accreditation to the Rio+10 / World Summit on Sustainable Development scheduled to take place in Johannesburg in 2002. After wasted time the Preparatory Commission once again, concluded by coming back to past precedents.

It is INTGLIM's assumption that governments must be increasingly exhausted by these endless negotiations over NGO participation. We are thus embarking on exploratory meetings with potential ally governments to present the General Assembly NGO Resolution and get their views on the issue of NGOs receiving consultative status with the General Assembly.

A recent meeting between INTGLIM and Bangladesh gave encouragement to our efforts. Bangladesh's Ambassador Chowdhury and the First Secretary assured us that the General Assembly NGO Resolution had Bangladesh's unequivocal support. Ambassador Chowdhury told

us, "We cannot argue nor implement without NGOs' help." His comment on the General Assembly NGO Resolution was that, if anything, we should ask for greater rights. The Ambassador and the First Secretary outlined a scenario for how Bangladesh might be able to assist with presentation of the resolution to the General Assembly. They also provided advice on other NGO-friendly governments to approach.

INTGLIM's strategy for passage of the resolution employs a long-term approach. From these meetings with governments we intend to identify a group of 10 to 20 UN member states that are willing to sponsor the Resolution for presentation to the GA. This group will be comprised of nations representing all regions, North and South, and all existing groups including G77 and non-aligned nations as well as European and industrialized States. Such an assemblage is intended to avoid polarizations that would mark the NGO Resolution as an initiative of a particular grouping of states.

We are simultaneously building a coalition of NGO endorsers of the resolution working on a broad spectrum of issues. The NGO Resolution has already garnered some significant endorsements. At its annual meeting in Vienna in November 2000, the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the UN (CONGO) reiterated its support for NGOs' General Assembly consultative status. Greenpeace International, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, the European Environmental Bureau, the Basel Action Network and most recently, Amnesty International, have each written open letters to Heads of States, Foreign Ministers and UN Missions calling them to support INTGLIM's General Assembly NGO Resolution. In addition numerous groups working on such issues as sustainable development, the environment, women's rights, children's rights, humanitarian relief, peace, and disarmament among many others have signed on as endorsers of the NGO Resolution.

This NGO coalition of endorsers has a vital role to play in activating UN member states to pass the NGO Resolution. In November 2000, Canada hosted an informal working lunch that consisted of a number of likely government supporters of the NGO Resolution. While the assembled government delegates expressed general support for the resolution, many said they lacked mandates from their governments to actively work on this issue. We are therefore encouraging the NGO endorsers to write their respective government ministers in national capitals to urge them to instruct their UN Missions to work towards passage of the NGO Resolution.

Indeed, it may take another couple of years before the NGO Resolution has sufficient support to be passed intact. Some argue that now is not the time for civil society to be pushing for greater access to the UN. Protests such as in Seattle in 1990 and at in Quebec are resulting in a backlash against NGOs, causing governments to be more wary of NGOs than ever. However, INTGLIM believes this is precisely why we must now articulate the importance of NGO participation and make a strong case for finally, after fifty-five years of existing practice, legally and formally establishing NGOs' rights in the context of the General Assembly.

The General Assembly NGO Resolution provides a winning scenario for all parties involved. Not only would its passage save on time and resources, but formalizing a common agreement on NGO participation would free the General Assembly and its Preparatory Commissions from renegotiating existing practices and open the way for discussion of innovative means for incorporating NGOs and utilizing their unique experiences and perspectives. In turn NGOs would receive recognition of their expertise and contributions to make to the work of the UN. In addition, if the United Nations General Assembly were to pass the GA NGO Resolution, it would

demonstrate leadership by setting an important precedent for NGO participation in global policy-making processes.

WFM will be posting updates on progress on the NGO Resolution on its website, with links to language on NGO participation, relevant UN documents, plus additional resources on NGO access to the UN and other international intergovernmental bodies. We will also provide information about what NGOs can do to help further this important effort.

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