

***“Rebuilding Societies Emerging from Conflict:
A Shared Responsibility”***

DPI/NGO 55th Annual Conference

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Opening Statement By

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(CONGO)

Excellencies, Distinguished Representatives of the United Nations, dear Colleagues and Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel deeply honoured and privileged to have been invited to say a few words of welcome on behalf of the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO) at this opening session. And I would like to congratulate the DPI, the NGO Section and the DPI NGO Executive Committee for having organized this extraordinary event.

For those who do not know CONGO yet: we are an independent membership/umbrella association of national, regional and international NGOs, associations and networks from North and South in consultative relationship with the United Nations. Our mission is and has been for more than 50 years to work with and for NGOs to ensure that they are present and have a voice whenever substantive issues are being discussed at the UN. The second part of our mission is and will be to go out to assist, train and empower organizations to enable them to take their seats and have a voice at the decision-making table of the UN.

Presently we have more than 500 members worldwide and the number is growing; this is vivid evidence of the interest NGOs have to be associated with the UN and to work hand in hand as full partners.

In view of the importance of the involvement of civil society organizations in the transition and reconstruction processes after civil wars, violent upheavals or democratic transitions I am very pleased about the choice of this theme for this year DPI/NGO Conference.

During the past decade and more we have witnessed democracies emerging and flourishing in many parts of the world. Hand in hand with this development new civil society organizations – particularly NGOs – have sprung up and already existing ones were strengthened, thereby reinforcing and sustaining the democratic process.

Yet, transition to democracy has often not been easy. Many states that lacked democratic legitimacy have exploded or imploded, often accompanied or followed by civil wars. The need of recognizing or creating multicultural states and societies based on the rule of law and respectful of the human rights of individuals and the right to self-determination of peoples and minorities has become overwhelming.

The importance of civil society organizations in conflict settlement negotiations has been widely recognized. Where states fail, the so-called “track two diplomacy”, involving representatives of civil societies on both sides, has

proven to be a valuable alternative to the often no more than stalemate positions resulting from government actions. NGOs are closer to the ground and to the reality of the victims.

Once peace is reached, the involvement of NGOs in the reconstruction process and furthermore in the creation and strengthening of a pluralistic society based on democratic principles is even more needed as guarantor of lasting peace. They know better the needs of the peoples they represent and thereby can help to address and overcome the deeper causes of conflict.

We are here to share these experiences, highlight good practices and widen our networks as valued actors in a sustainable reconstruction process. As NGOs we are an essential pillar of participatory democratic governance.

The cooperation between NGOs and the DPI is a long-lasting one and many of CONGO members are also DPI associated NGOs. This cooperation can be strengthened and extended to every field of the UN activity, including post-conflict reconstruction and recovery.

During the Millennium Forum that the DPI, CONGO and other partners organized in New York in May 2000, the representatives of over 1000 NGOs agreed on an action plan that has somehow paved the way to the adoption by the General Assembly of the Millennium Declaration and the subsequent Millennium Development Goals.

One of the challenges stated therein is to ensure peace, security and disarmament and I would like to briefly recall here the tasks assigned to civil society. It was and still is urged:

- to give special attention to those disabled and injured by violent conflict, such as children and the elderly and to the reintegration into society of former combatants;
- to maintain the impartiality and independence of NGOs working for peace, security and disarmament from political, military and economic powers and, finally,
- to protect the humanitarian principles that are linked with human rights and to reject all attempts to transform the field of humanitarian assistance into a new market open to private companies.

As we gather here today to discuss our role in the rebuilding of societies emerging from conflict, we should revive these commitments.

Many of us are just coming back from the Summit in Johannesburg where Governments have agreed - however timidly – on a range of commitments and action that, once applied, can improve the lives of people living in poverty and reverse the continuing degradation of the global environment. The Summit has

also generated partnership initiatives by and between governments, citizen groups and businesses.

However, NGOs, disappointed by the lack of a much bolder vision and more concrete time tables and measurable targets have embraced a declaration and program of action which reaffirms the universality and indivisibility of all human rights for sustainable development and claims that “another, a sustainable world is possible” and they say “we shall make it happen!”

In this spirit I wish the Conference much success in moving forward with the concept of shared responsibility and, in leaving the shadows of September 11th behind us, to give peace a chance!