

SUMMARY

Forum on General Assembly and Non-Governmental Organization Relations

21 November 2006

I. Introduction:

An interactive forum on General Assembly and non-governmental organization relations was held on 21 November 2006 at the Millennium UN Plaza Hotel, under the auspices of the Office of the President of the General Assembly and the United Nations Foundation. The aim of the forum was to stimulate greater understanding between Member States and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) regarding the challenges and opportunities for further partnership. The forum brought together representatives of 50 Member States, 150 NGOs and seven United Nations offices who shared their views, concerns and recommendations.

The following key messages emerged from the forum.

- 1) Partnership between the United Nations and NGOs is vital to the success of the UN in achieving its goals.
- 2) NGOs bring vision and information to UN meetings and contribute to UN efforts operationally, financially, and in terms of public awareness and support.
- 3) NGO participation in UN meetings and processes is complementary, not contradictory, to the UN's intergovernmental structure whereby Member States are the sole decision-makers.
- 4) The systemic implementation of best practices of NGO participation in the UN would benefit all stakeholders.

II. Opening remarks:

Ms. Kathy Bushkin, Executive Vice-President of the United Nations Foundation, welcomed the partnership between the UN Foundation and the Office of the President of the General Assembly in organizing the forum. Ms. Bushkin underscored that effective partnerships with non-governmental organizations and the private sector are essential to the success of the UN Foundation in supporting United Nations causes. Ms. Bushkin commended H.E. Sheikha Haya Al Khalifa, the President of the 61st General Assembly, for her commitment to a strong relationship between the United Nations and NGOs.

H.E. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa, President of the 61st Session of the General Assembly, thanked Ms. Kathy Bushkin and the United Nations Foundation for their strong collaboration. The President of the General Assembly expressed her wish to enhance the relationship between Member States and NGOs and her intention to build on previous experience gained in this respect. She noted the various ways in which NGOs

are instrumental to the successful work of the United Nations, namely in galvanizing public support for the UN, in the implementation of humanitarian efforts and in representing the needs of constituencies on the ground. She also acknowledged the impact of NGOs in the context of current UN reform processes. In addition to strengthening the relationship between the UN and NGOs on the ground, the President of the General Assembly stressed the importance of ensuring that NGOs have a voice at the regional level and at UN Headquarters.

III. Presentations:

Ms. Susan Myers, Executive Director of the New York Office of the UN Foundation moderated the first segment of the forum.

H.E. Mr. Johan L. Løvald, Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations, commented that the UN is at a crossroads and that the international community's efforts to meet future challenges will require real partnership between governments and the NGO community. Noting that NGO input and commitment are crucial to motivating awareness and progress on pressing issues, Ambassador Løvald referenced paragraphs 172-173 of the 2005 World Outcome Document, by which Member States welcomed the positive contributions of the private sector and civil society, including non-governmental organizations to the work of the UN and encouraged the continued dialogue between them and Member States. Ambassador Løvald described the findings of the report which he and Ambassador Rezlan Ishar Jenie of Indonesia had co-authored on the relationship between Member States and non-governmental organizations per the request of the President of the 60th General Assembly. He further mentioned various steps proposed by the report which could be considered within the current UN framework, such as (a) periodic meetings between Co-Chairs or Facilitators and non-governmental organizations before and during informal consultations, (b) periodic meetings between Chairs of the Main Committees of the General Assembly and non-governmental organizations, (c) briefings by the President of the General Assembly for NGOs, (d) guidelines for how interactive hearings of the General Assembly with NGOs are to be conducted, (e) the consideration of the appointment of an Assistant Secretary-General or Under Secretary-General for NGO or civil society affairs, (f) the consideration of the full funding of the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS), and (g) provisions to ensure the continued access of NGOs to the UN in the Capital Master Plan.

Ms. Jackie Shapiro, First Vice-President of the Conference of NGOs in consultative relationship with the United Nations (CONGO) alluded to constructive models of Member State and NGO interaction. The multi-stakeholder approach of the World Summit on the Information Society Preparatory Process, which included arrangements for oral interventions and written contributions of NGOs during the negotiation of the Outcome Document of the Summit was deemed most useful. The drafting process of the United Nations Convention on the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities, as well as current practices in the context of the Human Rights Council provided other useful modalities for NGO participation. Ms. Shapiro expressed CONGO's support for

proposals including, (a) the establishment of a UN trust fund to enable the participation of NGOs from the developing world in UN meetings, (b) briefings for NGOs by the President of the General Assembly, Co-Chairs and Main Committee Chairs, (c) making negotiations open to NGO observers at certain points during drafting processes, and (d) ensuring that General Assembly Hearings with NGOs are truly interactive and exploring innovative approaches to Hearings, such as thematic multi-stakeholder breakout sessions.

Sr. Joan Kirby, Chair of the NGO/DPI Executive Committee, representing 1500 NGOs associated to the UN's Department of Public Information, explained the role of the Committee in disseminating information and encouraging support for the United Nations worldwide, and bringing information from civil society back to the UN. Sr. Kirby emphasized the importance of communication in building partnerships to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, and the value of information communication technology to that end. To enhance such partnerships, she expressed support for the proposed creation of a post for NGOs in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General. She further noted, that open meetings are indispensable in providing timely and accurate information to global constituencies and urged the Capital Master Plan to maintain a Resource Center for NGOs.

Mr. James Paul, Executive Director of Global Policy Forum, described a contradiction between perceived advances in NGO access to the UN and actions that have restricted access. Notably, restrictions due to security, reductions in the budget of NGLS and the elimination of a focal point for NGOs in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General have motivated NGOs to question the seriousness of the UN regarding partnership with NGOs. Mr. Paul cautioned against perceiving support for NGO access as an issue on which Member States are divided according to North-South lines and cited examples of developing countries which have been supportive of NGO engagement in the context of the Security Council. He proposed that the NGO Working Group on the Security Council is an example of best practice that could apply to the General Assembly. He further recommended that, (a) the UN draw inspiration from the preparatory processes leading to the global conferences of the nineties, (b) NGO status at the General Assembly be established, (c) a post for NGO affairs in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General be reinstated, and (d) better funding of NGLS be made available. He welcomed the continued collaboration of NGOs with the Office of the President of the General Assembly.

Mr. Jeffery Huffines, Representative to the United Nations for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahai's of the United States, speaking on behalf of the Millennium NGO Network, urged Member States to permit NGOs to observe General Assembly meetings and make NGO documents available to them. Mr. Huffines noted the existing compliance requirements of ECOSOC and DPI and urged those bodies to hold NGOs accountable to those standards. He expressed support for annual hearings with NGOs prior to the opening of the General Assembly while cautioning that hearings should not exclude, but be complementary to other forms of interaction. He concurred with the proposals for, (a) regular dialogues between NGOs and the Main Committees of the

General Assembly, (b) the appointment of a post in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, (c) provisions for NGOs in the Capital Master Plan, (d) the establishment of a trust fund for the participation of NGOs from developing countries in UN meetings, (e) the greater use of information communication technologies, (f) a simplified NGO accreditation process, and (g) the regularization of the budget of NGLS.

Sr. Joan F. Burke, Chair of the NGO Committee for Social Development, emphasized that for poverty eradication policies to be successful, persons living in poverty must be actively engaged in their formulation, implementation and evaluation. She noted that NGOs, despite their often limited material resources, include highly qualified experts and practitioners who provide direct services to persons living in poverty. In the context of the UN, NGOs perceive themselves as consultants who contribute expertise, not as decision-makers. Sr. Burke echoed support for the establishment and full funding of a trust fund to bring people living in poverty to UN meetings. She emphasized the importance of good working relationships between NGO committees and corresponding UN entities and noted that an overall focal point for NGOs in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General could provide for greater coherence. In reference to the Commission for Social Development, the two year work cycle was found useful for organizing and contributing the input of NGOs. She also welcomed informal dialogues with the Main Committees of the General Assembly, such as that which had been recently initiated by Third Committee.

IV. Open floor discussion:

Ms. Shamina de Gonzaga, Special Adviser on NGO relations in the Office of the President of the General Assembly, moderated the interactive segment of the forum.

The interactive segment of the forum included interventions by 21 organizations, offices and delegations, represented at the highest level and by other senior representatives; the Hague Appeal for Peace, the International Council for Caring Communities, the United Nations Development Group, the Women's Environment and Development Organization, the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council, the World Federalists Movement and Coalition for the International Criminal Court, United Nations Habitat, the NGO Section of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Permanent Mission of Egypt to the United Nations, Zenab for Women in Development / Sudan, the International Fellowship for Reconciliation, Rotary International, the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, the Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations, the NGO Committee on Youth, the NGO Section of the United Nations Department of Public Information, Mission Sisters, the United Nations Non-governmental Liaison Service, B'nai B'rith, the World Council of Churches, ATD Fourth World, and the International Women's Tribune Center.

The following key points emerged from the interactive segment of the forum.

- 1) **Successful partnerships** between the United Nations and NGOs are crucial for monitoring progress and helping to achieve the UN's goals, as noted by NGOs and

some Member States. In order to sustain and enhance such partnerships, it was felt that certain measures should be taken to contribute to greater trust and collaboration. To that end, it was recommended that, (a) UN staff be sensitized regarding how to work with NGOs, (b) NGOs ensure that they meet the standards which are required of them by the UN bodies with which they are accredited, (c) best practices be implemented on a systemic basis, (d) innovative approaches to dialogue be explored, and (e) principles of accountability, inclusiveness and flexibility be central to all considerations of NGO participation.

- 2) **Best practices** for NGO participation in intergovernmental processes can include, or be modeled after arrangements set forth in:
 - (a) preparatory processes which encourage broader support for, and expedite the implementation of, the desired outcome of a negotiation - the process which led to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court remains an important reference in this respect;
 - (b) the United Nations Habitat Governing Council, whereby formal negotiations are in some instances suspended to allow for NGO interventions;
 - (c) the World Urban Forum, which gathers all stakeholders to discuss concrete issues in depth and formulate recommendations as an input to intergovernmental deliberations;
 - (d) electronic forums and multi-lingual blogs, as a vehicle for disseminating information on inter-governmental processes and receiving input from civil society worldwide; and,
 - (e) NGO focal points at the country level and fully funded NGO offices in various UN entities.(Other best practices mentioned in the presentations above have not been repeated in this section.)
- 3) **The establishment of a trust fund** to facilitate the participation of NGO representatives from the developing world and people living in poverty in UN meetings was widely supported by the NGO community. While the proposal was positively received by some Member States as well, it was mentioned that the potential budgetary implications could pose a challenge. The UNDG initiative to establish a trust fund for NGO capacity building at the national and local levels was subject to interest. It was also suggested that dialogues with NGOs be held in developing countries, in order to encourage greater participation of NGOs from diverse regions. Specifically, the UN Headquarters in Nairobi could be utilized for such meetings. The need to support NGLS' role in bringing NGOs to UN meetings was raised in this context.
- 4) **The appointment of an Assistant Secretary-General or Under Secretary-General for NGO affairs** was consistently recommended as an important step to enhance United Nations and NGO relations. Once again, it was signaled that the potential budgetary implications would have to be considered. In view of the current practice of appointing NGO focal points at the country level, it was felt that the proposed post would be logical and useful for the purpose of overall coherence.

- 5) **Access to General Assembly meetings and the United Nations building** was a matter of great concern. Proposals to invite NGOs to observe meetings and contribute their written input to Member States during negotiation processes and to hold more open meetings were reiterated. In addition, the need to reinstate NGO access to the 42nd Street entrance of the United Nations and to once again include information on NGO events in the Journal was expressed by both UN Offices and by NGOs.
- 6) **Hearings of the General Assembly**, while welcome in some contexts, were deemed insufficient measures of interaction. Some considered that NGOs should manage their own participation in hearings. The need for adequate resources was stressed as a central component in organizing hearings.
- 7) **Women's representation and youth participation** were strongly encouraged, in particular, the active involvement of women's groups in UN meetings and processes, the continued inclusion of youth delegates on national delegations, as well as the establishment of youth advisory committees.
- 8) **Other recommendations** included, (a) making available to Member States an index of NGOs according to their area of expertise, (b) promoting issue based accreditation of NGOs, and (c) convening a multi-stakeholder International Conference on conflict prevention and peacebuilding in 2010.
- 9) **Upcoming opportunities** for the involvement of NGOs were raised in the context of, (a) the consideration of the Report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on United Nations System-wide Coherence, (b) the preparations for the 2008 Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development, (c) the thematic debates of the General Assembly on development, gender and the dialogue among civilizations, and (d) the new mandates of the Economic and Social Council. It was further suggested that Secretary-General Designate Mr. Ban Ki-moon convene a briefing for NGOs at the beginning of his tenure, and that the President of the General Assembly maintain her efforts to strengthen the relationship between Member States and non-governmental organizations.

V. Concluding remarks:

H.E. Mr. Johan Løvald, Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations, observed that much progress could be achieved within the existing system, as was evidenced by the various best practices mentioned. He stated that progress required the initiative of all stakeholders. Referencing the Report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on United Nations System-wide Coherence, entitled "Delivering as One", Ambassador Løvald expressed his hope that there would be continued NGO contributions and noted that it was incumbent on all, including Member States, the UN system and NGOs to work towards greater coherence. Responding to comments on NGO

involvement in the Peacebuilding Commission, he mentioned that discussions were currently on-going as to how to involve NGOs in future meetings of the Commission.

Ms. Shamina de Gonzaga, Special Adviser on NGO relations in the Office of the President of the General Assembly, noted the immediate relevance of the issues discussed and the importance of galvanizing greater energy among Member States in order to address these questions.

Ms. Susan Myers, Executive Director of the New York Office of the United Nations Foundation, thanked the participants for their active involvement and expressed the UN Foundation's wish to continue collaborating with the Office of the President of the General Assembly and all parties in the follow-up to the forum.