



UN Secretary-General names Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former President of Brazil, to lead high-level review of UN-civil society relations

(NEW YORK, 13 February) Asking for a sweeping assessment of interaction between the United Nations and civil society organizations, and recommendations for improvements, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan today appointed former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso to chair a blue-ribbon panel on relations with civil society.

The creation of the panel was originally proposed as part of a broad set of reform measures designed to make the United Nations more efficient and more capable of responding to the new demands of the twenty-first century, announced by the Secretary-General on 30 September 2002.

Chaired by **President Cardoso**, the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations includes 11 additional members, who are affiliated with governments, non-governmental organizations, academia and/or the private sector: Mr. **Bagher Asadi** (Iran), Ms. **Birgitta Dahl** (Sweden), Ms. **Peggy Dulany** (United States), Mr. **André Erdős** (Hungary), Ms. **Asma Khader** (Jordan), Mr. **Juan Mayr** (Colombia), Ms. **Malini Mehra** (India), Mr. **Kumi Naidoo** (South Africa), Ms. **Mary Racelis** (Philippines), Mr. **Prakash Ratilal** (Mozambique) and Ms. **Aminata Traoré** (Mali).

The Panel will look into the modes of participation in UN processes of non-governmental organizations, as well as of other non-governmental actors such as the private sector and parliamentarians. The Secretary-General has asked the Panel to identify best practices within the UN system and in other international bodies, and use them as a basis for recommendations to be issued within twelve months. The Panel is also asked to find ways to make it easier for civil society actors from the developing countries to play a full role in UN activities.

The Panel will begin its work against a backdrop of exponential growth over the last decades in the number and influence of non-governmental organizations, and their increasing interaction with the United Nations and influence in formal deliberations of UN bodies and conferences. NGOs work closely in the field with UN humanitarian missions and development projects, and have won important victories in priority areas of UN concern, such as reducing the threat of land mines and relieving the debt of poor countries. They have been instrumental in directing international attention to the importance of poverty reduction and human rights. The United Nations, in turn, has provided a beacon for many NGOs and other civil society actors, through its Charter principles and the goals set at the Millennium Summit in 2000 and at global UN conferences.

There are also signs of strain in the overall very successful relationship. Areas of difficulty are noted in the Secretary-General's 30 September 2002 reform report.

"Many Member States are wary of the constant pressure to make more room for NGOs in their deliberations, while NGOs feel they are not allowed to participate meaningfully", the Secretary-General says in the report.

Also taken into account are technical difficulties arising from the sheer volume of NGO participation. "It is now physically impossible for the Organisation to accommodate all NGOs requesting participation in UN conferences and meetings", the report says. It further notes an often-confusing variation in standards for participation in different Summits, conferences and meetings.

On the other side of the equation, there is a wide variation among non-governmental actors participating in UN deliberations, including parliamentarians and business groups, and the respective formats of their interaction need to be clarified.

In addition, the Secretary-General's report expresses concern that there is a lesser participation in UN affairs of NGOs from developing countries, as compared to those from the North.

"It is, of course, the prerogative of Member States to define the terms and conditions governing accreditation and participation of NGOs in United Nations conferences and other deliberations," the Secretary-General said in his 30 September report. "But all concerned would benefit from engagement with civil society actors based on procedures and policies reflecting greater coherence, consistency and predictability."

Background: civil society at the UN

The first avenue by which non-governmental organizations took a role in formal UN deliberations was through the Economic and Social Council. Forty-one NGOs were granted consultative status by ECOSOC in 1948; by 1968, 377 had that status. Currently, there are more than 2000. Another early means for NGO involvement was via the UN Department of Public Information, since its inception in 1946. DPI accreditation allowed NGOs special access to information about UN activities, and in turn a better capacity to promote and discuss UN policies. The number of NGOs accredited by DPI has grown from 200 in 1968 to about 1,400 in 2002. About 1,900 NGO representatives attended the most recent annual DPI/NGO Conference, in September.

Civil society participation expanded dramatically during the cycle of UN global conferences of the 1990s, beginning with the 1992 UN Conference on the Environment and Development -- the Earth Summit. Both non-governmental organizations and business groups took highly visible roles in the Conference and its preparations, and these "major groups" were assigned an important follow-up role by the action plan, Agenda 21. Since then, NGOs have had the opportunity to address plenary sessions of UN conferences and often are included among national delegations. At the recent World Summit on Sustainable Development, more than 3,500 NGOs were accredited, and businesses were key players in the partnership programmes that were a major component of the Summit outcome.

General Assembly special sessions have also been addressed by NGO speakers, and some countries have included civil society representatives in their Assembly delegations. Many UN treaty bodies now routinely consider reports from NGOs, alongside official reports from Governments.

NGOs recently have also given testimony to the Security Council in relation to specific crises, as well as on issues such as children in armed conflict, through use of the "Arria formula". Devised in 1993 by Venezuelan Ambassador Diego Arria, this format allows a Security Council member to invite other members to an informal meeting outside of Council chambers, where they are briefed by experts who are not high UN officials or associated with member Governments. The Council was first briefed by NGO experts at an Arria formula meeting in 1997.

All of the UN funds, programmes and specialized agencies now maintain formal arrangements for interaction with NGOs. At the level of field operations, partnership between the UN system and NGOs in humanitarian and development missions has been the rule for decades. NGOs now commonly participate in UN country-level planning processes.

For more information, contact Tim Wall of the UN Department of Public Information, Development Section, 1-212-963-5851; wallt@un.org.