

**Statement presented to the United Nations Pacific Regional Seminar  
on Decolonisation**

*Participation of the Non Self-Governing Territories in the work of the  
United Nations System*

**Presented by  
Dr. Carlyle Corbin  
Independent Expert on Governance**

**Shangri La Resort  
Yanuca, Fiji**

**29 November 2006**

## **Introduction**

**The importance of the participation of the non self-governing territories in the work of the United Nations system is a longstanding mandate of the United Nations. There is an important organic link between the process of political development of the non self-governing territories (NSGTs), and assistance to these territories from the wider United Nations system.**

**This assistance is critical to developing the readiness of these territories in assuming the powers of full self-government, especially as many of the economies of these territories require a heightened measure of human resource development in relation to their engagement with the globalised economy.**

**The General Assembly has included the participation of the territories in the UN system in its resolutions since its very first session in 1946, and a series of resolutions continue to present day to this effect, with the aim of stimulating participation in the UN system.**

**This participation is facilitated in two ways. First, many of the territories have access to assistance from the UN agencies, usually through coordination of the *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)*. In many cases the territories have country programmes facilitated by *UNDP* with input from relevant agencies depending on the scope and nature of the requirements of a territory. In some cases, these territories participate in regional programmes of specific agencies.**

**The second method of participation is direct membership, associate membership, and/or observer status, mainly in the UN specialised agencies and UN regional commissions, depending on the rules of procedure of the specific agency.**

**A number of the specialised agencies have heeded the call by the General Assembly to facilitate the participation of the territories in their work, including the *Food and***

*Agricultural Organisation, the International Civil Aviation Organisation, the International Maritime Organisation, UNESCO, the Universal Postal Union, the World Health Organisation and the World Meteorological Organisation.*

The extent of participation of the territories in these UN bodies is not as extensive as it could be, owing mainly to insufficient awareness on the part of the territories regarding their eligibility to join such UN bodies. It is also the case that many of the agencies do not consider the participation of the territories a priority, despite annual resolutions of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council requesting that the issue be taken up in the governing councils of these agencies.

Thus, when the Secretary-General makes his annual request for information from the specialised agencies on their assistance programmes to the territories, only a few agencies reply. Even a number of agencies which include territories in their programmes do not reply. A better approach needs to be found for the UN system to acquire this important and relevant information.

### **Participation in UN Regional Commissions**

Perhaps the best illustration of success in terms of inclusion of the territories in a UN organisation is with the UN regional commissions. Accordingly, in the Pacific, all of the NSGTs except *Tokelau* are associate members of the *Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific*. In the Caribbean, all but *Bermuda* and the *Cayman Islands* belong to the *Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)*.

The rules of procedure of the regional commissions provide for full participation without the right to vote. Thus, *Puerto Rico* served as chairman of ECLAC from 2004-06.

ECLAC also has a ministerial level *Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee* of which the *US Virgin Islands* has served as chairman from 1988-89, and again from 2004-06.

## **Participation in UN World Conferences and UN Special Sessions**

Emerging from the associate membership in the regional commissions was an initiative at the beginning of the 1990s to provide for observer status for those territories which were associate members of the regional commissions to enjoy observer status in the UN world conferences in the economic and social sphere. This began with the *Earth Summit* in Brasil, and most recently in the *International Meeting on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States* held in Mauritius.

Other world conferences in which the associate members participated were on the environment, population, social development, human settlements, and natural disaster reduction. the information society and others. This category of “*associate members of regional economic commissions*” had to be added to each conference individually. This was coordinated through the *Working Group of Associate Member Countries* of ECLAC’s subsidiary body, the *Caribbean Development and Cooperation and Cooperation Committee (CDCC)*, which is chaired by the non self-governing territory of the US Virgin Islands. This initiative includes the participation of associate members of ESCAP as well as ECLAC.

In this regard, the support of all member states including the administering Powers has been instrumental in securing the required changes in the rules of procedure to include this category of participation.

The observer status capacity provides the territories with access to the dialogue on some of the major economic and social issues facing the sustainable development of small island countries, and it provides the political space to the non self-governing territories whose participation in these world conferences continues to enhance their capacity building.

In this vein, the work of ECLAC in facilitating the participation of the territories in UN world conferences has been featured consistently in resolutions of the *Economic and Social Council*, and of the *General Assembly*.

**ECLAC member states sought to explore future modalities for their associate members in participation in some of the work of the *Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)*, given that non - governmental organisations enjoy a formal status with ECOSOC.**

**This initiative, however, was opposed by several administering powers who were led to believe that the mere exploration of possible modalities for associate member participation in some ECOSOC programmes was not possible on constitutional grounds. There are no constitutional impediments to such participation, however, although there are some political mis-perceptions which served to impede this innovative initiative.**

**Ironically, many of the same countries which administer territories and that adopted this initiative in ECLAC reversed their position in ECOSOC and opposed the initiative. So it did not go forward. The participation of the associate members in relevant ECOSOC programmes is no cause for concern, however, as it would be a simple matter of delegation of power to the elected governments of the associate members that they already enjoy in regional commissions, world conferences and some specialised agencies.**

**Although this initiative did not go forward, it proved instructive, especially as related to the inconsistency of the process of inclusion where decisions are often based on the exclusion of information and rational deliberation.**

**Accordingly, then, continued support for principles of self-determination and decolonisation are useful, but it is such tangible support, such as the participation in the technical work of the UN system that is important to the development process of the territories in a globalised world. Flexibility must be shown by member states if these territories are to be adequately prepared to assume increasing levels of self-government.**

**Therefore, continued and expanded access to the UN system is an important tool for sustainable development in a globalised world, especially for small island territories whose access to international institutions continues to remain unnecessarily limited, often based**

on overly restrictive and “control-based” considerations.

In 2004, I completed a comprehensive study for ECLAC which provided a legislative basis for the participation of the territories in the UN world conferences, and which identified areas of interest for future participation in the programmes of action of these conferences. This study can be made available upon request. A number of issues of concern were identified in that study including the deficiency of information available to the territories on their access and eligibility to UN programmes.

The study also highlighted the in-accessibility or limitations on external resources for their participation. A voluntary fund was recommended as a means to assist the territories in enhancing the participation.

In closing, I wish to draw your attention to 2005 resolution which calls for the *UN Department of Public Information* and *UNDP* to produce an information document on the availability of UN programmes to the territories.

It is hopeful that this document will not be a mere compilation of information on various UN bodies that is readily-available, but rather an in-depth analysis of the actual programmes available with focus on the eligibility criteria for non self-governing territories.

Only such an in-depth analysis will be useful to ensure that the territories will be able to access the relevant UN programmes for the benefit of their development process, consistent with the relevant United Nations resolutions where implementation continues to be a major challenge.