

Governing Our Global Society

CIVIL SOCIETY

Are we on the edge of something new? The proliferation and vigour of non-governmental and not-for profit organizations, social movements, dot.causes, constituency alliances, social forums, and other more or less structured networks and coalitions spanning the earth is inspiring and impressive. Like the earth's biosphere, this global civil society is vulnerable to internal and external influences. It has its weak spots and it has challenges.

Over the past decade, though, CSOs have shown adaptability and a growing sophistication in claiming a right to political space at regional, national, continental, and global levels. Many of the groups responding to our invitation to contribute to this report are part of an increasing global ferment, one that is remarkably diverse and uneven. It bubbles with proposals, demands, and experiments.

DYNAMICS AT THE COUNTRY LEVEL: ARAB SOCIETIES

“During the last two decades, the United Nations introduced new concepts of development; by the end of the nineties, new indicators to evaluate development were elaborated in addition to the traditional and technical ones related to economic growth and income, and life expectation and illiteracy rates. The new indicators highlight socioeconomic, cultural and environmental, and life conditions. This new approach to development led to a new understanding about the role of civil society organizations, particularly NGOs. Thus, the role of NGOs became very important and effective as a main partner of the government and the public administration in designing, implementing, and evaluating national policies in the socioeconomic, cultural and environmental and human rights strategies. The challenge that Arab CSOs are facing is to develop and to support civil society capacities, by recognizing the role and the importance, but also by providing the enabling environment in the Arab countries.”

- Ziad Abdel Samad, Arab NGOs Network for Development

Civil society claims for political space include demands for the creation of new structures for global governance. There is a growing scepticism about the validity and legitimacy of current global institutions, and intense debate about what might replace them. Here we will consider some elements of that debate. Some ideas focus on the pre-eminent global political institution, the United Nations, and suggestions for how civil society can develop more meaningful engagement. Other thoughts involve global economic governance. Finally we will end with a snapshot look at current work and debate on civil society's self-organizing for global participation.

THE UN AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Over the past 10 years, relations between the UN and civil society have become increasingly intense, characterized by diversity, frequent complexity and occasional breakthroughs in experimentation and engagement.

In 1995 the Commission on Global Governance recommended the creation of an ongoing Peoples/Civil Society Forum at the UN with advisory status to the General Assembly. The suggested Forum would start with the establishment of consultative status for NGOs to the General Assembly. It “would offer international civil society direct access to the UN system and provide an entry point for its views into the deliberations of the UN,” to “help the Assembly to decide – by informing its discussions and influencing its conclusions.” This proposal has been hovering at the edge of international debate for a decade.

It gained further expression in 2000. In May, the UN Secretary-General invited hundreds of NGOs to the New York headquarters to participate in the “We the Peoples Millennium Forum” in preparation for the Millennium Summit in September 2000. The Forum produced a visionary declaration and program of action addressed to governments, the UN, and civil society on all the major issues on the UN agenda.

It called for “the creation and funding of a Global Civil Society Forum to meet at least every two or three years in the period leading up to the General Assembly, provided that such a forum is conducted democratically and transparently and is truly representative of all sectors of civil society and all parts of the world.” (*Our Global Neighbourhood*, 1995 Report of the Commission on Global Governance available at <http://www.libertymatters.org/globalgovernance.htm>).

However, by 2005, not only has the proposed Global Civil Society Forum not been established, there is very little support for it. Why? And what are the alternatives?

George Monbiot, for instance, in *The Age of Consent: A Manifesto for a New World Order* (2004), argues that such a Forum “would be a disaster for democracy” by limiting civil society participation to a select few, and could divert attention from the fundamental issue, some form of global citizen-based representation. The Commission on Global Governance, on the other hand, said it would be a useful step “pending the evolution of a forum in the nature of a parliamentary or people’s assembly within the UN system.”

At issue is not just the question of how to select participants from the ever-increasing number of NGOs in the world. There are many other complicating considerations, including the changed security environment around the UN since the 9/11 terrorist attack on New York. There is also the more important issue of how to build greater access for civil society to the UN and its diverse agencies and programs located around the world. This must mean more than supporting visits to New York and should include establishing ongoing relationships in every country.

In 2003, the Secretary-General’s report to the General Assembly on UN reform recognized that it is time for the UN to better reflect the geo-political realities of globalization. These realities include global civil society actors and networks and calls for action on issues which not only transcend national

“Engaging with Civil Society is a necessity not an option.”

- Cardoso Panel Report, 2004

boundaries but reflect NGO preoccupations with global norms and values — peace, human rights, the environment, social justice. The Secretary-General set up a High Level Panel, chaired by the former President of Brazil, F.H. Cardoso, to study and recommend ways to enhance the UN's relations with civil society.

The Cardoso Report *"We the Peoples: Civil Society, the United Nations and Global Governance"* was released in June 2004 (<http://www.un.org/reform/panel.htm>). It conveys a new spirit, one that would make the UN more outward looking and more effective at identifying multiple constituencies with stakes in particular issues. The report re-defines "multilateral" to mean not just many governments, but many levels of participation by all relevant actors. The report suggests improved support for civil society participation through a trust fund and higher-level leadership in the Secretariat. It proposes access for NGOs to the General Assembly. It suggests new ways that the UN could be more "user-friendly" at the country level. It recommends joint thematic global parliamentary "standing committees" to review key global concerns like the environment.

The Cardoso Report does not propose a regular civil society forum, but it does recommend specific forums to advise the General Assembly. Specifically it proposes regular two-day informal, interactive hearings with NGOs prior to the opening of the General Assembly each year, on an agenda negotiated between UN and NGO representatives. An initial suggestion is that such hearings be instituted prior to special reviews of the Special Session on HIV/AIDS in 2005 and 2006.

The Cardoso Panel recommendations and the Secretary-General's response to them, merit serious examination by civil society organizations. Many of the proposals are worthy of energetic support. Without that support it is unlikely that any official delegation will take the initiative to propose General Assembly action. Such action is urgently needed, and organizations with a common interest need to band together to make that happen.

In December 2004 another High Level Panel, this one on Threats, Challenges and Change, recommended in its report, *A More Secure World – Our Shared Responsibility*, that the General Assembly establish "a better mechanism to enable systematic engagement with civil society organizations." The report acknowledges that civil society and NGOs "can provide valuable knowledge and perspective on global issues." This recommendation endorses Article 65 of the Cardoso report. (*A More Secure World: Our shared responsibility*, Report of the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change is available online at <http://www.un.org/secureworld>).

Agencies and groups like the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) (<http://www.un-ngls.org>), CONGO (The Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status with the UN) (<http://www.ngocongo.org>), the World Federalists (<http://www.wfm.org>), and WFUNA (<http://www.wfuna.org>) can help to engage a wide range of other organizations that have an interest in developing stronger relations with the UN. The matter is practical and urgent.

In what could be a precedent for the sort of engagement Cardoso calls for, there will be in June 2005 a General Assembly Hearing with NGOs to prepare for the September leaders' summit. This innovation in consultative relations between the UN and civil society is exciting great interest among

NGOs around the world. The President of the General Assembly called on NGOs to present ideas to him for the Hearing. They have agreed to do so, and to persist in contributing to the preparatory process, with the aim of ensuring effective NGO input and participation.

A NGO Millennium +5 Network has been developed at the UN in New York, initiating Millennium +5 NGO Forums in conjunction with each of the ECOSOC Commissions – Social Development, Women, Sustainable Development. Their aim is to bring together priority issues for the Millennium Review Summit. The results will be contributed to the Hearings June 23-24.

There are a number of NGO consultative processes and “shadow” evaluative reports which will feed into the Hearings and be directed to the Summit; notably work being done on the MDGs and Financing for Development by diverse NGOs, many associated in the Global Call to Action Against Poverty; NGO responses to the reports of the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change and on UN-Civil Society Relations; as well as the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, which will hold the Global Partnership Conference “From Reaction to Prevention” at the UN in New York, July 19-21, 2005.

Almost all of these processes are open to diverse constituencies, who are encouraged to formulate ideas and recommendations. Whether groups are based among children, the aging, women, youth, Indigenous communities, labour, or a particular thematic concern, the opportunities are there to be used, expanded, and continued.

LOOKING FORWARD, GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

How is “global citizenship” best expressed and best realized?

Academics, journalists, and civil society groups are asking the question and wrestling with answers.

One option is to transfer republican or parliamentary models to the global level. This involves visions of a global people’s assembly. *The Guardian’s* George Monbiot asks: Why accept a substitute, when you should be working urgently for “the only genuinely representative global forum... a directly representative one...a world parliament. As everything has been globalized except democracy, the rulers of the world can go about their business without reference to ourselves.”

A global parliament would be a place where ideas, good and bad, could do battle in a forum with global recognition and weight. It could formally hold global powers to account. It could quicken the bringing together of human concerns and interests. Several diverse NGO initiatives have attempted to popularize the idea of a global “Peoples Assembly.” Eminent legal scholars, like Princeton’s Richard Falk in the US, have theorized how such a global representative assembly could be developed.

British scholar David Held, in *Global Covenant, The Social Democratic Alternative to the Washington Consensus* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), suggests a step that might lead in this direction: increasing national parliamentary review and scrutiny of international agreements.

“The common currency that runs throughout so many struggles and movements for liberation across the world today – at local, regional, and global levels – is the desire for democracy.”

- Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2004

The World Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalization proposes a similar approach. Established by the International Labour Organization (ILO) to help achieve “a fairer globalization,” the Commission concludes the global system is neither coherent nor sufficiently democratic, transparent, or accountable. The Commission presses for increased support and contributions to the UN system. They favour regular parliamentary review of actions of international institutions at the national level and joint parliamentary review of global economic, social, and environmental policies. (For more information, please visit <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/fairglobalization>).

There are personalities and institutions that militantly resist such visions. For example, World Bank Vice-President for Europe, J.F. Rischard, argues cogently that we just don’t have time to deal with such global “constitutional” ideas if we are going to address the 20 urgent global issues (like poverty and global warming) that face us. Something less cumbersome is needed, he argues, something like “issues networks” formed of the “best and brightest” that would establish norms and road maps to address global problems.

As well, sovereign bodies, like the US Congress, and many executive branches, jealously guard their rights against encroachments by international bodies.

Nevertheless, the civil society and NGO Forum ideas and proposals are taking on more and more momentum, as we documented in *We the Peoples 2004*. They can be further developed through 2005 and beyond.

OUR COMMON BUSINESS: GOVERNING THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

“The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), entrusted by the UN Charter with a global coordinating function, leads a shadowy existence. The most powerful industrialized nations have set up separate coordinating bodies of their own, including the G-7/G-8. As far as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are concerned, these countries generally have their own way in them without having to pay much heed to political majorities in the UN.”

- Thomas Fues, *Reform Agenda 2005: The United Nations at a Historic Fork of the Road*. Briefing Paper No. 5. German Development Institute (DIE) Bonn 2004, available online at <http://www.die-gdi.de>

Fundamental to the establishment of a more equitable distribution of power and resources is changing the current structure of economic global governance. Survey participants and others stress this point.

Every institution claiming to share governance of our common global economy requires review and significant change, as we have indicated earlier in this report. Furthermore, one of the debates emerging in the new millennium has to do with overall management of the globalized economy. This debate is reflected in references to the need for increased “policy coherence” among institutions like the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO, and the UN system.

Structures for more effective coordination and management are proposed by a variety of international commissions and studies. Civil society organizations are prone to ask: *In whose interests, and policy coherence for whom?* (Business, the poor, respect for human rights, the powerless, etc.).

One proposal to emerge is the “G-20” (or “Northern G-20”), based on an initiative in the 1990s led by the Canadian government. It recognizes the importance to bring India, China, Brazil, and a number of other nations into discussions that have, to date, been monopolized by the more exclusive G-7/G-8. Other similar coalitions of low and middle income nations are achieving some success to balance powerful economic nations in trade negotiations and high level WTO meetings.

The Helsinki Process on Globalization and Democracy (Tanzania and Finland) seeks stronger international and regional negotiating forums to ensure a more just and equitable division of the benefits of globalization. NGOs from Finland and Tanzania, including United Nations Associations, and others have developed a Global Citizens’ Platform to further these aims. There will be a Helsinki Process world conference in Helsinki, September 7-9, 2005. (<http://www.helsinki.fi>)

The Helsinki Process group on “global problem-solving” proposes a consultative process, involving the UN and many other actors, leading to a new “Apex” group of countries. This body would have the prestige to demand annual reports on the state of the global economy, from the Bank, Fund, WTO, and other multilateral institutions. The group supports regular international parliamentary review of such reports, as recommended by the ILO Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalization (<http://www.helsinki.fi/Track1>).

One criticism of this proposal is that rather than bringing discussions of global economic matters into the pre-eminent and universal political body, the UN, this would be one more in a proliferation of parallel and perhaps competing arrangements. Further this “G-20” is not the only G-20, as a Southern-based coalition of governments with that name developed out of the confrontations of the Cancun WTO Ministerial meeting, and continues.

Proposals that do place the UN at the core of a more coherent and equitably global economic structure often focus on ECOSOC. ECOSOC has been increasingly marginalized in recent decades by the aggressive growth of the World Bank, and the clout of the WTO. The issue of how to reform and strengthen ECOSOC and bring it into the centre of global economic, social, and environmental policy-making has provoked a number of new proposals in recent years. Recommendation 89 of the report of the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change calls upon ECOSOC to transform itself into a “development cooperation forum” with a more focused agenda built around the themes of the Millennium Declaration. While a participatory development forum might, in itself, be a worthwhile enterprise, this proposal does not deal with the need to bring key global economic decision-makers into the UN tent, and into UN norms and frameworks, a key civil society demand.

“We begin by liberating ourselves from the perception that we must wait upon nation states to deliver global justice. This assembly will belong to the people, and we require no one’s permission to establish it.”

- *The Age of Consent*

The report of the Commission on Global Governance suggests the establishment of an Economic Security Council (ESC) to bring global economic policy-making into the UN, with equivalent “clout” to the Security Council. Others, including the Zedillo Panel advising the 2002 Monterrey Financing for Development Conference endorse the proposal. As one organization focusing on governance issues points out, while it is not logical to expect trade and finance bodies to develop adequate human rights or environmental policies, the ECOSOC, or something like it would be the logical forum for cross-sectoral considerations.

A variety of CSOs, including UBUNTU, the International Facilitating Committee on Financing for Development, and the World Federalist Movement’s Institute for Global Policy have developed other specific proposals. The issue merits focused attention by all NGOs interested in a stronger UN, reformed global governance, and fundamental economic, social, and environment change. In the meantime, governments could strengthen the capacity, authority, and coordinating power of the ECOSOC by several practical and feasible steps, including the creation and mandating of an executive committee.

CIVIL SOCIETY SELF-ORGANIZING

Ideas from civil society for new structures and methods for global governance are not limited to UN reforms to global financial institutions and economic arrangements. Plans and activities to provide space and frameworks for civil society participation in governance at global levels are proliferating.

Spontaneous networking among people all over the world represents the emergence of a global civil society according to the Global Civil Society yearbook, produced annually by the London School of Economics since 2001. Co-author John Keane likens civil society to the global biosphere.

“Just as every part of the earth, from the highest mountains to the deepest seas, supports life,” he writes, “so too global civil society is found on virtually every part of the earth’s surface.” It is a “vast, interconnected, and multi-layered social space that comprises many hundreds of thousands of self-directing or non-governmental institutions and ways of life” (<http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Yearbook/yearbook.htm>).

The World Social Forum is a site for debate on global futures. In preparing the 2005 Porto Alegre Forum, a participatory methodology engaging almost 2,000 organizations, the Forum developed the themes to be highlighted, helping like-minded groups from diverse backgrounds to come together (<http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/>).

The Forum itself, as a principle of operation, refuses to take decisions as a body. Groups meeting under its umbrella can make decisions and do so. Some 150,000 people took part in the 2005 Forum with significant sessions on global governance and the UN. The Forum has stimulated regional and national forums around the world.

A November 2004 gathering of more than 600 people from several continents in Padua, Italy focused on exploring ways to open up and expand the “public sphere” at a global level and explore global democracy. The event gave birth to a global peoples campaign to “reclaim our UN”

(<http://www.tavoladellapace.it/default2.asp>). Dot Keet from the Africa Trade Network in South Africa (<http://twnafrica.org/atn/campaigns/whatistheatn.htm>), sums up one point of view:

“There are parallel systems of power today: the US empire, the IMF, WTO, transnational corporations. All of this contradicts the principles on which the UN is based. It’s a political problem and there is no alternative to democratic struggle to change the situation.”

One of the more ambitious civil society initiatives on governance is the Barcelona-based UBUNTU (<http://www.ubuntu.upc.es>), the World Forum of Civil Society Networks and its Campaign for Reform of International Institutions.

The Global Policy Forum (<http://www.globalpolicy.org>), with bases in the United States and Germany, maintains a continuing overview of governance debates and proposals.

The Helsinki-based Network Institute for Global Democratization has produced provocative studies bringing together civil society proposals for democratic governance (<http://www.nigd.org>).

The World Federalist Movement’s Institute for Global Policy (<http://www.wfm.org>), has just published a short paper summarizing a number of feasible proposals.

The Montreal, Canada-based and internationally governed Forum International de Montreal (FIM) (<http://www.fimcivilsociety.org>), organized a world civil society conference on global governance in 2002 (G02) and is organizing once again for (G05), May 29-June 1, 2005.

These events provide an opportunity for activists, scholars, and members of local and national representative bodies to build on existing work and develop new strategies. The events which lead to the September leaders’ Millennium Review Summit can and must be used to engage governments and ask fundamental questions about how we are to govern global policy in light of the objectives of the Declaration.

A UN FOR THIS CENTURY

Like a golden thread, every year our survey results document civil society’s recognition of the inescapable importance of the United Nations. People everywhere understand the unique and irreplaceable work of the United Nations in preventing and mediating conflict, in peacekeeping in all its dimensions, in working to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and in so many other tasks.

Many leaders will take note of the High Level Panel’s attention to the UN and human security. The proposals from CSOs for institutional change and the Cardoso proposals for stronger UN-civil society relations merit attention as well.

The United Nations and its historic work and accomplishments make the achievement of the Millennium Declaration objectives and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals a possibility. That possibility is strengthened by the existence of a fermenting civil society in dynamic and creative partnership with the United Nations.

We could be on the edge of something new. *Carpe Diem — Seize the Day.*

“Reclaim Our UN”

We propose a global day of action for democracy, freedom and peace, against all fundamentalisms and wars, to be held on the eve of the Summit of Heads of State convened by the UN in New York in autumn 2005 for a review of the commitments undertaken at the Millennium Summit and the reform of UN.

- From a call for a World Way of Action, September 10, 2005. (www.tavoladellapace.it)