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Item Type	Book
Authors	Sadoun, Britta
Publisher	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-09-13 09:16:01
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/178742

Political Space for Non-Governmental Organizations in United Nations World Summit Processes

Britta Sadoun



This United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) Programme Paper has been produced with the support of the Ford Foundation. UNRISD also thanks the governments of Denmark, Finland, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom for their core funding.

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ISSN 1020-8178

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Acronyms

CONGO	Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations
CSO	civil society organization
DSE	Deutscher Stiftung für internationale Entwicklung (<i>German Foundation for International Development</i>)
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	non-governmental organization
NGO/DPI	Department of Public Information–NGO Section
PrepCom	preparatory committee
UN	United Nations
UNOG	United Nations Office at Geneva
WCHR	World Conference on Human Rights

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kléber Ghimire and the staff at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), especially Alexandra Efthymiades and Santiago Daroca Oller, for useful comments and suggestions during the writing process of the paper. To improve earlier drafts of the paper, the referees added helpful ideas. A special thank you goes to Nour-Eddine Sadoun, who encouraged me in writing and provided me the necessary ease.

Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

The world conferences and summits held under the auspices of the United Nations have provided a new political space for involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In this paper, Britta Sadoun links this observation with broader developments in the relationship between the United Nations (UN) and civil society actors.

The paper begins with a discussion of NGOs as civil society actors, and then goes on to review the specific mechanisms for NGO participation in UN events. Next it traces how the summits served as meeting points for growing numbers of NGO representatives from across the world, with wide-ranging backgrounds, interests and experiences. In 2003, to better assess the emerging relationship between the UN and NGOs, the UN Secretary-General appointed a Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations. The fourth part of the paper discusses some of the key findings of the panel's report.

Section 5 looks at the five-year follow-up to the Millennium Summit, convened in 2005. NGO participation at this event (and at the Millennium Summit in 2000) was different from other UN summits. NGOs were no longer a group of actors on the sidelines of the main events. Instead, there was an unofficial hearing organized especially for them at UN headquarters in New York several months before the actual summit. Thus, the author argues, at one level NGOs are becoming an integral part of the summits, often cited by official diplomats and UN staff, while at another level they are kept at a distance from the policy deliberations.

Section 6 discusses these trends in relations between NGOs and the UN. The 1990s showed that cooperation with NGOs and other civil society actors is necessary in order to elaborate viable proposals, the successful implementation of which depends widespread support. Yet according to the author, UN decisions with regard to NGO involvement are dominated by ideas of efficacy and efficiency. This kind of "cost-benefit analysis" seems to neglect to some extent the political character of (some) NGOs. Sadoun therefore calls for a different attitude—a moderating and mediating approach—toward these actors in UN international policy-making events.

Britta Sadoun is a political scientist and social anthropologist. A research assistant at UNRISD from March 2004 until December 2005, she worked mainly on civil society and social movements, and UN reform and development. Parts of an earlier draft of this paper were presented at the International Conference on Multistakeholder Diplomacy (Malta, February 2005).

Résumé

En faisant place à la participation d'organisations non gouvernementales (ONG), les conférences et sommets mondiaux tenus sous les auspices des Nations Unies leur ont ouvert un nouvel espace politique. Dans cette étude, Britta Sadoun rattache cette observation à l'évolution générale des relations entre l'Organisation des Nations Unies (ONU) et les acteurs de la société civile.

L'auteur commence par envisager les ONG comme des acteurs de la société civile avant d'examiner les mécanismes spécifiques disponibles pour faire participer les ONG aux conférences de l'ONU. Elle explique ensuite comment un nombre croissant de représentants d'ONG venus du monde entier et issus d'horizons extrêmement divers, représentant une très large palette d'intérêts et d'expériences, ont pu se rencontrer grâce aux sommets. En 2003, pour mieux évaluer la relation s'établissant entre l'ONU et les ONG, le Secrétaire général de l'ONU a nommé un Groupe de personnalités éminentes sur les relations entre l'ONU et la société civile. La quatrième partie du document traite des principales conclusions du rapport du groupe.

La section 5 porte sur le Sommet tenu en 2005, cinq ans après le Sommet du millénaire. La participation des ONG à ce sommet (et à celui de 2000) était différente de celle des autres sommets de l'ONU. Les ONG n'étaient plus des acteurs en marge de l'événement central. Au contraire, une réunion-débat non officielle a été organisée spécialement pour elles au siège de l'ONU à New York, plusieurs mois avant le sommet. Ainsi, fait observer l'auteur, si, d'un côté, les ONG deviennent partie intégrante des sommets, souvent citées par les diplomates et les fonctionnaires de l'ONU, de l'autre, elles sont tenues à distance des délibérations politiques.

La section 6 traite de l'évolution des relations entre les ONG et l'ONU. Les années 90 ont montré que la coopération des ONG et d'autres acteurs de la société civile était nécessaire à l'élaboration de propositions viables qui, pour être appliquées avec succès, doivent bénéficier d'un large appui. Cependant, selon l'auteur, les décisions de l'ONU touchant à la participation des ONG obéissent à un souci d'efficacité et d'efficience. Ce genre d'analyse "coût-bénéfices" semble négliger dans une certaine mesure le caractère politique de certaines ONG. Britta Sadoun plaide donc pour une attitude différente—de modération et de médiation—envers ces acteurs dans les grandes conférences de l'ONU où s'établissent les politiques futures.

Britta Sadoun est politologue et socio-anthropologue. Assistante de recherche à l'UNRISD de mars 2004 à décembre 2005, elle a principalement travaillé sur la société civile et les mouvements sociaux, et sur la réforme de l'ONU et le développement. Des extraits d'une version antérieure de ce document ont été présentés à la Conférence internationale sur la diplomatie multipartite (Malte, février 2005).

Resumen

Las conferencias y cumbres mundiales celebradas bajo los auspicios de las Naciones Unidas han brindado un nuevo espacio político para la participación de las organizaciones no gubernamentales (ONG). En este documento, Britta Sadoun vincula esta observación con avances más amplias en las relaciones entre las Naciones Unidas y actores de la sociedad civil.

El documento comienza con un análisis de las ONG como actores de la sociedad civil, para luego examinar los mecanismos específicos de participación de las ONG en eventos de las Naciones Unidas. Seguidamente se describe la forma en que las cumbres han servido de puntos de encuentro para un número cada vez mayor de ONG de todo el mundo que representan una amplia gama de sectores, intereses y experiencias. En 2003, para poder evaluar mejor esta nueva relación entre las Naciones Unidas y las ONG, el Secretario General de las Naciones Unidas designó un Grupo de personas eminentes encargados de examinar las relaciones entre las Naciones Unidas y la sociedad civil. La cuarta parte de este documento aborda algunas de las conclusiones clave del informe de este grupo.

La sección 5 está dedicada a la reunión de seguimiento de los resultados de la Cumbre del Milenio a cinco años de su celebración, en 2005. La participación de las ONG en este evento (así como en la Cumbre del Milenio en 2000) fue distinta de sus intervenciones en otras cumbres de las Naciones Unidas. Las ONG habían dejado de ser un grupo de actores reunidos al margen de los eventos principales. Por el contrario, se llevó a cabo en la sede de las Naciones Unidas en Nueva York una audiencia oficiosa organizada especialmente para estas organizaciones varios meses antes de la cumbre propiamente dicha. Resulta entonces que, en opinión de la autora, las ONG están convirtiéndose, a un cierto nivel, en parte integral de las cumbres, cuyas posiciones son citadas a menudo por los diplomáticos oficiales y el personal de las Naciones Unidas, mientras que, a otro nivel, se les mantiene excluidas de las deliberaciones de políticas.

La sección 6 plantea estas tendencias en las relaciones entre las ONG y las Naciones Unidas. Los años 90 demostraron que la colaboración con las ONG y otros actores de la sociedad civil es necesaria a fin de formular propuestas viables cuya ejecución exitosa depende de un apoyo generalizado. Sin embargo, según la autora, las decisiones de las Naciones Unidas sobre la participación de las ONG tienen que ver predominantemente con cuestiones de eficacia y

eficiencia. Este tipo de “análisis de costo-beneficio” parecería desdeñar hasta cierto punto el carácter político de (algunas) ONG. Por ello, Sadoun aboga por una actitud distinta—un enfoque de moderación y mediación—hacia estos actores en los eventos internacionales de formulación de políticas de las Naciones Unidas.

Britta Sadoun es especialista de ciencias políticas y antropóloga social. Como asistente de investigación en UNRISD entre marzo de 2004 y diciembre de 2005, trabajó principalmente los temas de sociedad civil y movimientos sociales, así como en la reforma y desarrollo de las Naciones Unidas. Partes de un borrador anterior de este documento se presentaron en la Conferencia Internacional sobre Diplomacia de Múltiples Partes Interesadas (Malta, febrero de 2005).

1. Introduction

The experience of world summits has influenced what is today discussed and practised in the relationship between the United Nations (UN) system and non-governmental actors. While not suggesting that all participatory methods and opportunities at UN conferences have been excellent, nevertheless, they have provided space for a broad variety of actors to speak. What participation potential have UN summits offered non-governmental organizations (NGOs), particularly in the 1990s? This paper retraces the tracks of NGO involvement in various UN world conferences in order to compare them with NGO participation opportunities at the Millennium Summit and its follow-up conference in 2005. Is the heyday of huge – especially in quantitative terms – institutionalized NGO involvement in UN policy-making conferences over? Do we see other forms of participation emerging?

This paper concentrates on the input legitimacy of NGOs. Input legitimacy is the ability to fulfil a legitimacy function by providing channels for popular interest representation and democratic accountability. Stressing politics and including polity to a certain extent, the paper refers mainly to issues related to structure and agency. This focus only briefly considers the policy element and the content of participation; therefore, the pay-off between content and form is decided in favour of the latter. Those who are interested in an issue are only able to attend the meetings and communicate with others if they have the requisite resources to do so (Bichsel 1996). The point at issue is the “input domain” of the conferences; thereby, the question of legitimacy is relegated to the “participatory gap” (Brühl and Rittberger 2001:16).

Though access is not a sufficient variable to wholly explain NGO participation at the international level, it is, nevertheless, a necessary variable. However, access alone does not automatically mean influence.¹ Within the process of a world conference, obviously not all interested or affected people can attend the meetings. Moreover, a reduction in the actual number of citizens directly involved in decision making is necessary, which makes some element of substitution imperative (Hersel 1998). Direct stakeholders participate alongside those who are less directly affected, no matter how committed to the plight of other people (Batliwala 2002). In both cases, however, one could argue that those who attend the conference have a certain level of professionalism, which should not to be confused with the clear limitations that competent organizations might have, such as a lack of financial means or problems issuing visas for their delegates, that hinders them from participating. They are aware of international events, are able to prepare and organize logistically for participation on the spot and feel that what they have to say would interest a large number of people.

The paper builds on primary sources, mainly UN documents, and the available relevant secondary literature on civil society engagement at UN summits. It highlights some empirical findings of NGO attendance and presence as institutions in the setting of UN conferences. This helps to analyse the NGOs’ role in the arena of global governance constituted by UN summits.²

First, NGOs are briefly discussed as civil society actors on the international scene. They are characterized as diverse actors providing and absorbing information in order to be present at and ultimately influence policy discussions. Then, UN summits as specific policy-making events are described. Their complex structure illustrates a unique institutional setting where a

¹ See Heins (2001); Welch (2000); Ottaway (2001).

² The literature on UN summits concentrates on different perspectives that sometimes touch on areas of NGO participation. Schechter (2001) focuses on the implementation of the conferences’ results, while Messner and Nuscheler (1995) provide short descriptive accounts of the conferences, and Dany (2006) focuses on policy analysis at the World Summit on the Information Society. Other researchers describe and compare events at single conferences; see, for example, Chen (1996) on Rio, the World Conference on Human Rights (WCHR) in Vienna and the Fourth World Conference on Women; Dias (2001) and Martens (2000) on the WCHR; Disney (2000) on the Geneva Social Summit; Lanchberry (1996) on the Rio Summit; van Rooy (1997) on food and the Rio Summit; and Silber (1994) on human rights. Also, single questions on legal and institutional issues are discussed (Brühl 2001) or all-embracing assessments and judgements are offered (Fomerand 1996; Foster and Anand 1999). Emmerij et al. (2001) provide a detailed overview of the most important UN conferences. From a development assistance point of view, the Deutscher Stiftung für internationale Entwicklung (DSE 1996) prepared an evaluation of major conferences for 1990–1996. Some authors encompass theoretical considerations and/or empirical data; see also Benchmark Environmental Consulting (1995); Eberlei (2001); Finke (2001, 2000); Clark et al. (2000, 1999, 1998); Krut (1997); Martens (2000); Rittberger (1983); van Rooy (1997); and Willetts (1989).

huge number of participants have the opportunity to take part in events that, even though they are ad hoc in character, also require long preparation. The paper then looks at how admission to the conferences is obtained, followed by a discussion on the importance of the quantity and regional distribution of participants. Part three discusses the specific elements and format of UN summits and the NGO participants that are embedded within the wider framework of the UN system. As UN summits saw a constant growth in numbers of participants throughout the early 1990s, and a decrease in the mid-1990s, the Secretary-General and his office considered it relevant to address civil society participation in the policy-making events. As a result of UN internal reports, the United Nations High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations was established in 2003. For the first time, therefore, NGOs became the subject of investigation by a panel of (external) experts. The establishment of the panel can be seen as an indirect outcome of the summits with large NGO participation, and therefore the analysis, viewpoints and proposals of the panel are described.

Section 4 of the paper looks at the participation mechanisms for NGOs at the Millennium Summit in 2000 and its follow-up, the 2005 World Summit. Neither of these events followed the pattern of the UN world conferences of the 1970s and the 1990s, which focused on one specific area of international relevance, for example, environment, women or human rights. Instead, the Millennium Summit adopted the Millennium Declaration on which the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are based. The paper discusses the goals that focus on development activities in several areas.

The different trends in relation to NGO participation in UN policy-making conferences are discussed in section 5. What are the recognizable lessons drawn by the UN system regarding the organization of UN summits and NGO participation? Several possible pros and cons are discussed. Finally, the conclusion offers a positive reading of the experiences of the UN-NGO relationship in international policy-making summits so far and highlights the political role that NGOs play at these events.

2. NGOs as Civil Society Actors

“Civil society is everybody” (UNOG no date) some say, yet the history of the term “civil society” reflects, first of all, the continual tensions between universality and particularity (Gosewinkel 2003). An ambivalence of exclusion and inclusion permeates civil society. NGOs are but one part of civil society—for a critical point of view see, for example, Petras (1999). The sphere of civil society provides an autonomous space for the various movements, organizations and associations that contribute to it. “Civil society organizations” (CSOs) is the overall term for organizations active in this sphere. CSOs include, among others, NGOs and community-based organizations. In the 1950s, the United Nations first defined the term NGO in a legalistic fashion as “any international organization which is not established by intergovernmental agreement shall be considered as a non-governmental organization” (United Nations 1950:article 71).

Apart from the initial UN understanding of NGOs, which differentiated between national and regional as well as international actors, the expression NGO is now commonly used for organizations that operate at various levels. Martens defines NGOs as “formal (professionalized) independent societal organizations whose primary aim is to promote common goals at the national or the international level” (2002:282).

NGOs are, therefore, formal organizations with a permanent structure and headquarters with (paid) employees who require specific training. Moreover, NGOs are independent; although they might receive financial support from various donors, including governments, they are not under the governments’ formal control. In order to capture the institutional participation of CSOs, for the purposes of this paper all organizations are considered NGOs if the UN system acknowledges them as such. This has two consequences: first, it encompasses organizations from a wide geographical range and of differing sizes, from local groups—so-called

grassroots—to multinational networks. Second, organizations are not necessarily excluded for being profit-making entities (Reinalda and Verbeek 2001; Meyers and Frantz 2002) or because they are quasi-NGOs—that is, those NGOs established by governments in order to promote the governments' interests.³

NGOs differ enormously regarding their primary focus, whether operational or advocacy work, and in terms of their organizational history and characteristics such as size, origin, membership and management. Thus, there are small European groups that have links with churches and define their work as solidarity work with poor people abroad. And there are networks of farmers in South America that are organized to represent their interests in the region. There are organizations that operate like well-managed businesses, as well as groups that function based on family ties. In addition, other important criteria are their resources in the financial (including funding), human and knowledge fields, and their political or ideological orientation. Furthermore, because most NGOs do not have a wide membership base, their accountability is not always consolidated. The dichotomy between Northern and Southern NGOs can be seen as a metaphor for gaps, tensions or differences between NGOs such as size, power, age/experience and means. The point is that such broad categories are, in turn, also marked by internal disparities. It would be too simple to equate the big, powerful and experienced NGOs with the North, or vice versa. In fact, the complexity of different characteristics is a shimmering facet of NGOs.

Input: Information role of NGOs in international policy and related legitimacy questions

The contribution of NGOs at UN summits is focused on advocacy. UN summits are places where measures are discussed and planned—but not implemented. Within the setting of a UN world conference, NGOs act mainly as advocates—lobbyists—while in everyday situations they often focus on more operational work (Gordenker and Weiss 1996; van Rooy 1997).⁴ A major proportion of the work of NGOs is information processing: raising awareness, setting the agenda, influencing policy processes and decision making, monitoring, reporting—all of which basically deal with the treatment of information (Weehuizen and Soete 2000). The creation of and the fight for publicity are the central terrain of NGO activities.⁵ This becomes even more relevant in international politics, which the general public is usually less interested in, due to its distance, and supposedly minor effect on, everyday life, as well as its complexity (Schmidt and Take 1997). NGOs themselves become international by “scaling up” (Uvin and Jain 2000:1409). One option is for organizations to become larger, more professionally managed, more efficient and more programmatic. Another orientation is toward programmes, rather than projects. Jordan and Tuijl (1998) criticize this concept for its presumption of a linear functional development. The creation of umbrella NGOs, networks and caucuses or the establishment of an international NGO and the creation of a transnational network or a coalition to link actors with shared purposes in transnational social movement organizations across countries can be different ways of NGO coalition building (Sikkink 2003). NGOs fulfil a “voice-function” (Frantz 2002:54);⁶ they mobilize expert or first-hand knowledge and act as information brokers.

The question of voice is an important element in the contested area of NGO accountability and legitimacy (Slim 2002; Nanz and Steffek 2004). NGOs are most often single-issue entities with a strong focus on a particular problem (Holmén 2002; Clark 1995). Accordingly, NGOs at UN

³ See Heins (2002); Roth (2001b); Alnoor (2003a, 2003b).

⁴ “Lobbying” and “advocacy” are commonly used interchangeably. “Lobbying” describes the attempt to influence the formal political process by approaching decision makers personally in the “lobby” of a parliament. “Advocacy” involves a broader notion, as it includes the efforts to influence public opinion as well as the attitudes of diverse social sectors at home and abroad (Jordan and Tuijl 1998). Lobbying and advocacy have become increasingly important within the NGO world.

⁵ See also Wapner (1995); Wahl (1998); Brand (2000).

⁶ Hirschman (1970) originally developed the concepts “exit, voice and loyalty” to explain the reactions of customers to companies; the underlying ideas were later adapted to several areas in the social sciences. Voice is conceptualized as “any attempt to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs”. In contrast to other interactive situations, in global politics there is no “exit” option, that is, it has to predominantly be a system of voice (Weehuizen and Soete 2000).

summits, as elsewhere, can be extremely heterogeneous in terms of objectives, structures, activities and ideologies (Edwards 2000). One could even argue that the heterogeneity of the NGO scene is its most obvious characteristic.⁷

One of the ironies of the global conference phenomenon is that by bringing together so many divergent NGOs, conferences also provide a forum for NGOs to discover their dis-agreements (Clark et al. 1998:25).

In contrast to other political actors, compromises can seldom be found by “basket solutions” since NGOs have, in general, a limited working field. A trade-off between their different areas of interest is, therefore, complicated. However, the consolidation of many “small” concerns—each seen by their intercessors as essential—can broaden horizons when actors are able to link up for a common concern; this could then lead to synergy.

Whom do NGOs speak for? To give one example: Do they speak “as the poor, with the poor, for the poor or about the poor?” (Slim 2002:5). Or, as Hersel (1998) puts it, are NGOs speaking for some (functional representation), speaking on behalf of others (delegative representation) or speaking in the interest of others (informative representation)? The very act of representation, for example, by participating in an NGO network, embodies political responsibility (Jordan and Tuijl 1998). Diverse representation claims can lead to massive legitimacy problems and tensions. Some NGOs, for instance, use grassroots organizations in order to provide the necessary legitimacy and credibility base for their claim to speak for the masses (Batliwala 2002). Networks, either horizontal or vertical, can function as intermediaries for cooperation, information, empowerment and policy negotiation. Networking, then, is a tool for sharing information. In the best-case scenario, it can help to connect the global and the local arenas (Markowitz 2001). Risks and problems arise, however, when networks are expected to represent the “NGO community” externally (Holmén 2002). In addition, even if the quantity of exchange of information or services might be dense, the quality can still be irregular and unbalanced.

In regard to the United Nations system, NGOs are seen as devices that provide a source of legitimacy for the UN as an international organization, which is more effective the more legitimate the NGOs are. However, for “NGO actors (themselves), the legitimation of their organization is a matter of (organizational) survival” (Hilhorst 2003:8). Legitimacy claims depend upon the ability of the NGO to demonstrate links, or legitimacy chains, between their operational work and experience, and their advocacy work (Hudson 2000). However, an assessment of the reach, sustainability and effectiveness or efficiency of NGO action in international relations has yet to emerge.

Abstractly speaking, one could suggest that NGOs represent particular interests that are not necessarily identical with the common good (Breitmeier and Rittberger 1998). NGOs cannot speak for society, but are just another voice within a pluralistic society (Eberlei 2001). They have to find a position in between common welfare and representation of particular interests (Beisheim 2001). While doing so, they oscillate between being a solicitor of interests of humankind and being a corporation for morality that is working with economic considerations (Hirsch 2001). Since they do not govern or legislate, NGOs can only represent interests, which can range from single interests to more abstract concerns (Beisheim and Zürn 1999). NGOs do not have formal power; instead, they have influence (Weehuizen and Soete 2000). Therefore, it follows that in pluralistic societies, only those actors that make collectively binding decisions and exercise authoritative governance have to be legitimized (Beisheim 2001). NGOs, like other actors in civil society, need to be measured by their contribution to the public contest of acceptance (Klein 2002:4). They are speakers that can enforce topics, but they do not actually phrase politics. That is to say, NGOs are agents of (deputy) interest perceptions.

⁷ See Tvedt (2002); Vakil (1997); Frantz (2002).

3. On the Way to Integrated Follow-Up: UN Summits as Meeting Points of Global Governance

The analysis of world summit processes is a core issue for global governance. Global governance can be described as an experiment in new forms of public participation, consultation, representation and accountability. It describes a multilevel political structure bringing together different degrees of action ranging from local to global, as well as actors from different spheres such as politics, economy and society in a dialogical and cooperative process.⁸ Global governance thus creates an international arena for lobbying, representation and self-regulation, not just among states, but also among powerful private sector actors and NGOs (Roth 2001a; Lipschutz 2000).

Conferences constitute places and times of highly compressed social relationships (Wesel 2004). UN summits may be considered to provide a microcosm of global state-society relations (Pouligny 2000). They are world events that are spatially unrestricted and characterized by their ad hoc nature.

As evocative as they may be as artefacts of global governance, global conferences give but a limited idea of the complex processes they present. They are maquettes [models] freezing what is dynamic and presenting as a tidy, finished product what is still in the making (Drainville 2004:113).

The consultative status of NGOs to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was bypassed for the first time at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.⁹ This was precedent setting for NGO participation at world conferences and opened up a window of opportunity. Since then, a “parallel NGO conference with a separate agenda, the NGO forum, has been a feature of most UN conferences and their preparatory meetings” (Clark et al. 1998:8). The summits contain elements of a new politics of governance, as institutions, organizations, networks and processes generated by global actors are expected to guide and restrain the behaviour of these and others in both national and international domains (Mürle 1998; Hamm and Fues 2000).

Structure: What access points do NGOs have?

UN summits are the result of a highly complex chain of events. The summit meeting itself is the main event, lasting from several days to two weeks. It is preceded by various kinds of meetings, such as PrepComs (Preparatory Committees), regional meetings, expert seminars and other conventions held in relation to the summit. In addition, several parallel events often take place and, in most cases, a follow-up conference ensues.¹⁰

⁸ See Hamm and Fues (2000); Held (2004); Mürle (1998).

⁹ All UN activities regarding NGOs are based on article 71 of the UN Charter. ECOSOC agreed in February 1948 to extended formats of cooperation with NGOs, and in 1968 this was replaced by ECOSOC resolution 1296 (XLIV) (United Nations 1968); it is still limited to ECOSOC and world conferences, and does not apply to other UN organs (Willetts 2000). With the revision of NGO status in 1996, the single paragraph that related to NGOs at world conferences was extended to 14 paragraphs, including the change that NGOs “shall as a rule be accredited”. Accredited NGOs can be differentiated according to their thematic scope. Category I includes NGOs that are “concerned with most of the activities of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies and are closely involved with the economic and social life of the peoples and areas they represent”. Category I NGOs are in general quite big organizations. They can send representatives to the United Nations, participate at ECOSOC meetings with the right to speak, suggest topics for the agenda and submit written statements; they are also required to prepare a report every four years. The second category, “Special Category”, combines NGOs that “have a special competence in, and are concerned with only a few of the fields of activity covered by ECOSOC”. Typically, these NGOs are smaller than those in Category I though they have the same duties and rights with the exception of agenda setting. NGOs in the third category, “Roster Category” are thematically more limited and may provide “occasional and useful contributions to the work of ECOSOC or its subsidiary bodies”. They might participate, but without the right to speak or submit statements. In addition, they are not urged to report to the United Nations. By 2004, 2,531 NGOs had ECOSOC status; 134 were in the general category (Category I), 1,474 in the Special Category and 923 in the Roster Category (Department of Economic and Social Affairs NGO Section no date).

¹⁰ See Willetts (2000); Alger (2002, 1999); Rice and Ritchie (1995).

One feature of UN summits is that only registered NGOs can participate in the event and the meetings that precede it.¹¹ To have access to the conference process, NGOs and their delegates need to be accredited (see table 1). Accreditation can be separated into organizational and individual-based access. When NGO members are personally invited to be part of a governmental delegation, then access is granted to individuals. The bulk of participants, however, need to go through a multilevel accreditation process. The existing ECOSOC accreditation process can make it easier for NGOs to receive accreditation for a conference, based on its specific rules. In both cases, the next step is personal accreditation, which means that individuals have to obtain accreditation in the name of their organization or any organization that is willing to let them participate under its name.

Table 1: Differentiated access of NGO delegates to UN summits

A. General access to a UN conference		
Organization-based access		Individual-based access
Accreditation to UN conferences		Inclusion in governmental delegations
Based on ECOSOC accreditation (can make it easier)	Based on conference rules	
Accredited NGO must handle accreditation of individuals in the name of the organization		Inclusion in governmental delegations
B. Physical access to conference venue (possibility of additional passes for NGO-registered delegates)		
<i>Plenary</i>	<i>Working groups</i> (for example, Plan of Action; Declaration)	<i>Informal meetings</i> (for example, called by individual states to solve critical issues)
Depending on space conditions (availability, willingness, arrangements, etc.)	Depending on space conditions, for example, first come first served; or separate badge system for single days	No access allowed, but may be possible eventually as member of governmental delegation
Observer rights	Observer rights	
Speaking rights	Speaking rights	

Note: Written statements can be distributed as UN documents, depending on the NGO's status of accreditation. **Source:** Author's analysis.

To actually attain physical access to conference rooms, it might be necessary to obtain other kinds of passes, which are issued on location. Depending on space availability, another option is to allow access on a first come, first served basis. Then, access is possible to the plenary session (with observer rights and, in due course, the right to speak through a representative of civil society) and to the working groups where the actual tasks of the conference are discussed, for example, the plan of action and the political declaration (with observer rights but rarely speaking rights; however, with the right to enter the room, NGO members have the possibility of talking directly to delegates).

However, NGOs are normally excluded from even entering the rooms where informal meetings take place, for example, meetings called by individual states to solve critical issues. Depending on the status of accreditation, written statements might be distributed as UN documents.

¹¹ As this paper's focus is on official conferences convened by the United Nations, excluding the parallel events where non-officially registered NGOs and CSOs can participate, it seems legitimate to deal with NGOs, while at the same time keeping the broader meaning of civil society in mind. On the one hand, NGOs can play a potential role in the formation of global civil society (Klein 2002; Kößler 1994; Heins 2001; Reinalda and Verbeek 2001); on the other hand, activities by transnational NGOs are not to be equated with the existence of civil society (Nölke 1997).

Also for the parallel summit—the NGO event—accreditation, and sometimes a fee, are required. This results in two forms of NGO participation. One is the parallel NGO event, normally organized by an NGO network in cooperation with a responsible UN body or office. The fact that such an event is usually held close to the UN conference and that it normally takes place several days ahead of the official conference, allows the NGO delegates to be observers or to be listed as speakers at the plenary session of the UN summit.

What is special about world conferences is that everyone—at least in theory—can be granted access, if they meet the regulations. Interestingly, individuals who want to participate can find ways to be registered under another organization's name if their own NGO is not authorized to participate. Of course, other obvious challenges such as resources, networks, official attitudes, the mass media and political culture can also impede participation (Scholte 2004). Thus, the activities that NGOs can pursue during a summit process depend on several general mechanisms in addition to their own ability, which depends on their resources and influence, among other factors.

Agency: Who used these opportunities?

A wide range of NGO actors from all geographical origins come together at UN summits. With the lengthy preparation process, the summits offer NGOs opportunities to either become active in the international policy sphere or strengthen their international commitment. On the other hand, summits can also give the impression of exclusion, when organizations that would like to participate are not able to do so.

To consider the quantity of NGOs or their representatives at a particular summit as indicative of the acceptance and relevance of these meetings loses strength when taking into account the (missing) empirical datasets. Just as numbers of NGOs are hard to find, it is not possible to reconstruct the number of participants at UN conferences. In most cases, there are no counts available.¹² There is also a confusion in the literature between representatives (that is, individual people) and NGOs (that is, organizations). In addition, only the summit itself is considered when calculating NGO participation, although important debates occur and decisions are made during the preparatory phase before the summit. It is for this reason that it is interesting to determine how many NGOs attend the various preparatory meetings (Sadoun 2006). The study and evaluation of UN documents helps to illustrate some of the details. If one compares the number of NGOs that made plenary statements at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights (WCHR) in Vienna with those that attended the preparatory events, it appears that all of the African-based NGOs that made statements were also involved in the pre-conference process, as were more than two-thirds of the North American NGOs. However, none of the NGOs from Oceania participated in previous meetings.¹³ What does active participation look like at a regional meeting? At the African regional meeting for the WCHR, for example, 26 statements were presented by NGOs: 16 were made by NGOs from Africa (62 per cent), six from Europe (23 per cent), two from Asia (7.5 per cent) and two from the Americas (7.5 per cent). The distribution of African regions that raised their voices during the regional meeting in Tunis is highly uneven, with 11 NGOs from Northern Africa (42 per cent of all NGOs and 69 per cent of all African NGOs), four from western Africa and one from the eastern part of the continent.

¹² For example, the only data that are cited in research is the primary information prepared by the Union of International Associations (Martens 2002). Secondary figures based on this are presented in some reports and monographs (Boli and Thomas 1997), or in work about NGO participation at UN world conferences. Researchers, UN officials, journalists and NGO representatives alike commonly play "the game of numbers". Though important, it is remarkable how little effort is made to collect the facts and figures. A questionnaire developed by Pianta and Silva (2003), who published their findings in the *Global Civil Society Yearbook* (Pianta 2001), shows that figures about UN summit participation are collected not at UN summits, but at different sites over considerable time periods. Similarly, one can perceive problems with handling the very limited data obtained by the United Nations High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations itself (United Nations High-Level Panel 2003). The report as published on the Internet suggests that the figures have very limited relevance, if any at all. For example, this is in part due to non-matching numbers where the sum of the partial questions does not match, but also for cross-question comparison. On the contrary, the Benchmark report (Benchmark Environmental Consulting 1995) at least discusses the difficulties involved in data collection and identifies the obstacles encountered.

¹³ See, for example, documents of regional conferences (UN WCHR 1993d, 1993a, 1993e, 1993f, 1992b, 1992a); conference reports and preparatory meetings (UN WCHR 1991, 1992d, 1992c, 1993b, 1993c).

4. United Nations High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations

The United Nations is undertaking an extensive reform process, and in February 2003 Secretary-General Kofi Annan saw the necessity of taking stock of the relationship between the United Nations and civil society (organizations), and to better organize the ways of engagement and interaction.¹⁴ He appointed the United Nations High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations with Fernando Henrique Cardoso as chair.¹⁵ The 11 panellists joined various consultations and presented the outcome of these meetings to the public on 11 June 2004 (United Nations 2004h); the Secretary-General published his response to the report in the 2004 General Assembly meeting (United Nations 2004e).¹⁶ The panel's comprehensive report lists 30 proposals for reform and elaborates on them at length. The focus of the panel's treatise is the reform of the United Nations, and it bases its ideas on four so-called paradigm shifts:

First, become an outward-looking Organization; Second, embrace many constituencies; Third, connect the local with the global—putting countries first; Fourth, help to reshape democracy for the twenty-first century (United Nations 2004h:28, paragraph 28).¹⁷

Furthermore, the panel explicitly identifies three global trends as particularly relevant to its purpose: (i) deficits of democracy in global governance; (ii) the growing capacity and influence of non-state actors; and (iii) the rising power of global public opinion (United Nations 2004h:24, paragraph 6).

The concept of "civil society"

The panel's starting point is that "engaging with it [civil society] well is a necessity, not an option" (United Nations 2004h:9, executive summary). Moreover, the panel's definition of NGOs is all-embracing: "all organizations of relevance to the United Nations that are not central Governments and were not created by intergovernmental decision"; and it explicitly includes associations of businesses, parliamentarians and local authorities (p. 13, glossary).

An economical approach to "civil society" is applied by using the metaphor of a "new marketplace—not for goods and services, but for interests, ideas and ideologies" (p. 25, paragraph 12). Some commodities that CSOs have to offer are listed, and the panel acknowledges that CSOs and other constituencies have long demonstrated expertise and competence. Of great relevance, therefore, is information that is mentioned in combination with the capability to open a global public space for debate (p. 26, paragraph 15) as well as providing access to new resources and skills (p. 27, paragraph 24), further stating that "global civil society now wields real power in the name of citizens" (p. 26, paragraph 17).

"Imbalances" of CSOs are reflected in the document where the panel states that present entities mainly have their headquarters in the global North, while their Southern counterparts tend to

¹⁴ In 1996, ECOSOC recommended that the General Assembly examine the question of participation of NGOs in all areas of the United Nations (United Nations 1996b, 1996a). The first report was published in 1998 (United Nations 1998) and a comprehensive report by the Secretary-General followed in 1999 (United Nations 1999a). On the basis of these documents, the Secretary-General announced in 2002 that he would establish a panel to review the relationship between the United Nations and civil society (United Nations 2002b).

¹⁵ Other examples of contemporary panels appointed by the Secretary-General to investigate specific questions include the High-Level Panel on Financing for Development (2001) appointed in December 2000 and the resulting document launched in June 2001 (United Nations 2000a) and recently the Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change appointed in September 2003 (United Nations 2004c).

¹⁶ The composition of the panel is critical for its legitimacy and its outcome. The only information available on the selection process of panel members can be found in the preface of the report: "The panellists were appointed as independent experts, representing only themselves. The selection ensured balance across the geographical regions and genders, and the panel collectively has experience in politics, government, the United Nations, civil society, academe and business" (United Nations 2004h:15).

¹⁷ Greater detail is provided in the report; for example, see pp. 28–30, paragraphs 28–37.

be urban focused “with unclear accountability to the grass roots”. The role of the United Nations is to monitor the representation and to discuss imbalances with the relevant networks.¹⁸

Understanding of NGOs in international policy making of the United Nations

Strengthening the United Nations–civil society engagement is expected to lead to increased UN effectiveness and better performance, and to make the United Nations more attuned and responsive to citizens’ concerns and enlist greater public support (United Nations 2004h:8, executive summary).¹⁹

Foremost, the “unique role of the United Nations as an intergovernmental forum” is stressed and seen as worth being “protected at all costs” (p. 8, executive summary). By definition, an intergovernmental organization is a body based on a formal instrument of agreement between governments; essential elements include three or more nation states as parties to the agreement and a permanent secretariat that performs ongoing tasks. “The UN is and will remain an intergovernmental organization where decisions are taken by its Member States” (Fréchette 2004). At the same time, the panel expects to “engage others too” (p. 8, executive summary).

Relationships with other actors, such as civil society actors, parliamentarians or economic players, add to the complexity of the matter. The blurring of limits can be illustrated by the definitions provided in the glossary of the report that differentiates between the United Nations, the UN Secretariat and the UN system. About the United Nations, the panel declares that member states work together in intergovernmental organs, adding that “civil society and other constituencies, while they are not members and do not vote, have become an essential part of the Organization through their contributions” (p. 14, glossary).

The panel report does not discuss the conditions for a successful civil society and the implications that this might have for the internal policies of states, such as democratization and rule of law. Generally speaking, instead it “encourage(s) Governments to allow civil society to flourish” (p. 69, paragraph 175; p. 70, proposal 30). Civil society, it appears, is seen as a by-product of governments’ goodwill. The seemingly all-inclusive definition provided in the glossary does not help to further clarify this, describing civil society as “associations of citizens (outside their families, friends and businesses) entered into voluntarily to advance their interests, ideas and ideologies” (p. 13, glossary). The panel avoids a crucial topic; namely, the performance of the member states themselves, which is of great relevance since they play a crucial role both at the United Nations and in relation to civil society. On the one hand, nation-states today are a means of organizing societies, either separating them or bringing them together. Civil societies have their starting point within these national spaces. It is where they are anchored, and connected to a certain territory and its people. Beyond this, civil society is able to connect groups with common interests across borders. On the other hand, nation-states form the constituency of the United Nations. Relations between the United Nations and civil society are, thus, shaped by states in particular.

Again, it is important to stress that the United Nations High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations is part of the broader UN reform that is currently under way. That civil society relations are the subject of a panel at all can be interpreted as an indicator of the visibility of the issue, and may also be a symbol that recognizes the presence and probable relevance of these actors. A need for this institutional adoption is identified in earlier UN documents (United Nations 1998; United Nations 1999a) that deal mainly with NGO interaction with the Secretariat and the agencies in a project-based way, but also reflect the degree of visibility of non-state actors at UN conferences in the 1990s. The panel aims to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the UN system by helping the United Nations as an organization to secure its role. Hence, it looks for sources of additional legitimacy. Legitimacy

¹⁸ See United Nations 2004h:59, paragraph 143; see also pp. 65–67, paragraphs 161–164; pp. 66–67, proposals 26–27, where the establishment of a fund is proposed.

¹⁹ In this section, page numbers refer to United Nations (2004h), when not specified otherwise.

can be reached either by symbolism, or by trying to match the expectations and rules of the environment. A functionalist point of view becomes evident. The panel suggests that the United Nations

differentiate between the deliberative processes, which welcome diverse expertise, and the formal negotiations of agreements, which remain intergovernmental. This would ensure Governments that civil society organizations are not undermining the intergovernmental nature of the United Nations but strengthening it by making its decisions better informed. Enhancing civil society relations can also keep the United Nations in tune with global public opinion—the ‘second super-power’—and enhance its legitimacy (p. 27, paragraph 24).

The “big global conferences of the 1990s” are cited as examples of promoting participation at the United Nations (p. 27, paragraph 21). The panel talks about an “issue’s life cycle in the global debate”, which influences the nature of the forum, as well as the forum’s size and, for example, selection of participants. However, it also suggests that the global conference mechanism is retained “to address major emerging policy issues that need concerted global action, enhanced public understanding and resonance with global public opinion” (p. 35, proposal 4). In other phases, the panel suggests holding public hearings with a limited focus as the broadened participation could have a greater impact in feeding into mainstream United Nations processes (p. 35, paragraph 63).

The panel emphasizes several principles that would help to broaden and deepen civil society participation and foster its contributions to a coherent global development effort. To achieve cost and time effectiveness, it suggests focusing on technical, rather than political considerations, increasing overall transparency, accountability and predictability of the process, and encouraging the effective use of information technology (p. 53f, paragraphs 123–127). It opts to merge all current parallel accreditation processes into one. Although it leaves open how one could classify NGOs in different categories (based on their legitimacy), the panel mentions “non-governmental organizations that are sponsored and controlled by Governments” and suggests that their time could be better used by others (p. 54, paragraph 127). The Secretariat reviews applications and a General Assembly committee then decides on whether to approve accreditation (pp. 54, 56: proposals 19–20). At the same time, measures are suggested to enhance the quality of civil society contributions by encouraging self-governance and self-organizing processes within civil society networks. As criteria for accepting or rejecting CSOs, the panel suggests that experience and connections to constituencies are important to the United Nations. Furthermore, it arranges for the termination of accreditation in case of an organization’s inactivity for four years (p. 57, paragraph 137). Nevertheless, the panel bears in mind that the actors are constantly changing and is aware of the risk of handpicking organizations. At the same time, it insists that there should be fewer presentations at the forums, but that they should be more compelling and more professional (p. 59, paragraphs 141–142). In regard to civil society networks, it admonishes the United Nations to try to play a less active role; it should limit itself to offering incentives.²⁰

5. The 2005 World Summit

The “2005 World Summit”, officially called the Integrated and Coordinated Implementation of and Follow-Up to the Outcomes of the Major United Nations Conferences and Summits in the Economic, Social and Related Fields, plus the Follow-Up to the Outcome of the Millennium Summit, bundles together various topics of otherwise separately discussed thematic areas. The length of the title stands symptomatically for this ambitious project: How can a synthesis of so many issues into one occasion be managed without losing the specificities involved?

²⁰ No steps are foreseen to follow up the panel’s work until the General Assembly has made a decision (Zehra Aydin, email to the author, 3 November 2004).

On the basis of General Assembly resolution A/RES/57/270 (United Nations 2002a), an open-ended ad hoc working group was established to “produce concrete recommendations to ensure an integrated and coordinated follow-up to the outcomes of the UN conferences and summits in the economic, social and related fields” (p. 2). After 14 formal and a series of informal meetings, the working group published its report.²¹ The Secretary-General “answered” this report and explained how ECOSOC in 1995 “initiated work on an integrated approach to conference follow-up” (United Nations 2003a:3, paragraph 5), which eventually led to the Millennium Summit. After several debates in the General Assembly at the end of 2003, the plenary session discussed a draft resolution (United Nations 2004k) on a major high-level event to be convened in 2005 (United Nations 2004j). It then adopted a resolution (United Nations 2004i) as the basis for the World Summit. Two reports of the Secretary-General (United Nations 2004g; United Nations 2004d) lay out modalities, format and organization of the General Assembly’s 60th session and the high-level meeting prior to it. Several reports of the Secretary-General and other constituencies describe the preparation of the follow-up conference.²² The format and organization of the 2005 World Summit conferences resemble the original conference five years before.²³ The Millennium Summit lasted for two days starting on 6 September 2000 at the United Nations headquarters in New York as an integral part of the United Nations Millennium Assembly (United Nations 1999b; United Nations 1999c). In March 2000 (United Nations 2000f), it was decided that the summit would be held under the overall theme, The Role of the United Nations in the Twenty-First Century. The set-up and the presidency of the meeting were specified: apart from plenary meetings, four interactive roundtable sessions, each with an interactive session to be held in concurrence with a plenary meeting, were planned.²⁴

For CSOs, the Millennium Forum was organized separately on 22–26 May 2000 at United Nations headquarters in New York. The NGOs forum’s final outcome was the Millennium Forum Declaration and Agenda for Action, which has been issued as an official document of the General Assembly (United Nations 2000d). The official final document, the United Nations Millennium Declaration (United Nations 2000b), was adopted on 8 September 2000 by 147 heads of state and government, and 189 member states. In chapter VIII (paragraph 30), Strengthening the United Nations, the signatories agreed “to give greater opportunities to the private sector, non-governmental organizations and civil society, in general, to contribute to the realization of the Organization’s goals and programmes” and in paragraph 20 “to develop strong partnerships with the private sector and with civil society organizations in pursuit of development and poverty eradication”. As follow-up, the Secretary-General published the report *Road Map towards the Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration* (United Nations 2001).²⁵

In 2005, once again a separate meeting for NGOs was convened. The president of the General Assembly presided over informal interactive hearings on 23 and 24 June 2005. A summary report prepared by the General Assembly’s president served as an official document prior to the High-Level Plenary Meeting. In addition, the Secretary-General was requested “to establish a trust fund to enhance the participation in the hearings of representatives of non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations from developing countries”. Member states were

²¹ See United Nations (2003c), adopted as General Assembly resolution United Nations (2003b).

²² Among them are the report of the Secretary-General entitled Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration (United Nations 2004f) and the report entitled *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All* (United Nations 2005b), which also reflects the findings of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (United Nations 2004c).

²³ United Nations (2005a:annex II, paragraph 11) defines the organization of the interactive roundtable sessions for the High-Level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly; although closed to the media and the general public, “accredited delegates and observers will be able to follow the proceedings of the roundtable sessions via a closed-circuit television in the overflow room”.

²⁴ See also United Nations (2000e) for the schedule of the summit, the list of speakers and organization of roundtable meetings; and United Nations (2000c) for the chairs and composition of the roundtable meetings.

²⁵ In addition, a framework of eight goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators to measure progress toward the Millennium Development Goals was adopted by a consensus of experts from the UN Secretariat, International Monetary Fund, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and World Bank (United Nations 2001). The MDGs are to be achieved by 2015 and aim to: 1. eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; 2. achieve universal primary education; 3. promote gender equality and empower women; 4. reduce child mortality; 5. improve maternal health; 6. combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; 7. ensure environmental sustainability; 8. develop a Global Partnership for Development.

encouraged to attend the hearings at the ambassadorial level to facilitate interaction (United Nations 2005a:paragraphs 8–10). Annex I (United Nations 2005a:paragraph 11) designates the inclusion of representatives from non-governmental organizations in consultative roles with ECOSOC, CSOs and the private sector—one from each group—on the list of speakers for the plenary meeting.

In fact, some 200 representatives of civil society and the private sector, selected before the informal hearings in June 2005 in consultation with the president of the General Assembly, were invited to participate in the hearings. In the end, 29 speakers and 187 “active participants” were listed by individual names and not their organizations (General Assembly Hearings no date). The themes for the hearings were based on the Secretary-General’s report *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All* (United Nations 2005b): (i) freedom from want; (ii) freedom from fear; (iii) freedom to live in dignity; and (iv) strengthening the United Nations. After a brief opening plenary meeting, four sequential sessions of the hearings, with two sessions per day, followed.

Just as for the Millennium Summit, the follow-up conference arranged for NGO consultations to be held three months in advance. NGO delegates were not able to attend the actual event. In a UN document, “security reasons and the space limitations in the United Nations building” are mentioned as the rationale for this decision (United Nations 2004d:4, paragraphs 21–22). Other UN documents point toward supplementary reasons for this decision. In its 59th session, the Fifth Committee (United Nations 2004a) discussed the “modalities, format and organization of the High-level Plenary Meeting of the sixtieth session of the General Assembly”. In a statement on this topic, the Secretary-General mentioned that “interactive hearings” in June were considered as meetings of the General Assembly and were, thus, cost neutral.

In May 2004, the Executive Committee of the Department of Public Information–NGO Section, and the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO) discussed how to ensure effective and broad-based civil society input, resulting in the document entitled *Civil Society Organizations Felt a Real Danger of Not Having Their Voices Heard* (CONGO/DPI 2005:10).

In November 2004, a letter, signed by 14 organizations and NGO networks, asked for more participatory modes in order to include civil society representatives in the 2005 World Summit event, or at least in its preparation. The petitioners suggested allowing more than one speaker from NGOs to deliver a speech at the plenary session of the summit and to organize informal hearings immediately before the summit took place. They argued that the “lack of appropriate civil society participation in the Millennium Summit four years ago (2000) is one of the reasons...why it took so long for public opinion to even learn about the MDGs” (letter to Kofi Annan from NGOs, 12 November 2004).²⁶

CONGO/DPI convened parallel NGO consultations on every major UN commission meeting from January to June 2005 as it was felt that “grassroots organizations, community-based groups, NGOs in the global south, and many others were not aware of what was happening at the UN or how they could play a part” (CONGO/DPI 2005:11).²⁷

²⁶ Available at www.un-ngls.org/MDG/UNSG.doc, accessed on 11 April 2006.

²⁷ Finally, CONGO actively participated in the Millennium+5 hearings and publishes a resultant compilation of NGO statements. The report, however, is qualified by the explanation that “recommendations and conclusions...have not been formally endorsed by the participants of the consultations, the organizations they represent, or by any of the members of the Millennium+5 NGO Network. These observations and recommendations are designed to capture the variety of messages and ideas that were expressed at the consultations, but should not be read as a scientific poll or statistical analysis” (CONGO/DPI 2005:12).

6. Discussion and Outlook

Examining UN summits and NGO participation comes at the right time as the UN summits can be seen as the basis for large-scale involvement of NGOs in UN policy-making events. In this respect, they subsequently influence both actors—NGOs and the United Nations. What are the lessons learned so far? “More significant than gross numbers of participants is the manner in which global conferences framed participation and structured the relationship between transnational policy-making ventures and would-be GCS [Global civil society] representatives” (Drainville 2004:111).

In 2006, decisions were made that may substantially form the future relationship of UN and civil society collaboration in the field of policy making. Becoming more effective from the United Nation’s point of view could endanger participatory standards that were reached in the last decade during the world summits. Yet, the United Nations needs CSOs so as to improve its own legitimacy, which in turn would strengthen the negotiation position of civil society actors.

UN summits: Experiments in large-scale participation

NGOs have worked as one player within civil society, both with and for the United Nations, for a long time, and the large number of NGO delegates that have gained access to UN world conferences has demonstrated the presence of these civil society actors. Conferences created a momentum through which the quantity (and perhaps also the quality) of civil society participation became obvious. These ad hoc conferences convened to discuss particular topics relevant to world politics, and each developed specific mechanisms to include NGOs. In the 1990s, NGOs coming from and active all over the world insisted on being involved in the processes of UN conferences, and a wide range of NGOs gained opportunities to speak out. This was not only true for the larger events—that is, the summits themselves—but also for the regional and general preparatory meetings. The regional meetings allowed a considerable number of non-ECOSOC NGOs—organizations not previously involved in UN processes—to participate, so these regional meetings served as “gate-openers”. Nonetheless, the preparatory meetings have mostly been closed events, with the majority of attending NGOs registered by ECOSOC. Therefore, the (limited) data might suggest that UN summits have influenced NGOs to become active on the international level as they provided a place to learn about discussions and to take part in them. The parallel events are not considered in this paper; however, they are also an example of an emerging self-organizing capacity that NGOs might further explore (see, for example, De Paula 2006, and Desai and Dwyer 2006).

Considering this, the first argument relates to the role played by UN summits. They opened opportunities for NGOs, yet these remained ambiguous. The legitimacy of voice and opinion was not a primary matter of discussions; rather, the question is who actually speaks for whom and who has the capacity to do so. The literature speculates about the practical contribution of NGOs, such as pushing the development of a global public and overcoming multiple levels of politics, by their “externalizing function”.²⁸ Furthermore, the literature on NGOs offers several hypotheses for their functions, including publicizing issues through representation of underrepresented interests. NGOs are supposed to get new topics on the official agenda (agenda setting);²⁹ to seek participation in all phases of policy making (for instance, decision making and implementation) (Uvin 1996:165; Keane 2001:44); devise political counter-drafts that could link local and global levels;³⁰ and develop new forms of cooperation and, by doing so, extend the repertoire of actions in international relations.³¹ NGO delegates also assume various informal roles such as event organizers, networkers or lobbyists, to mention a few.

²⁸ See Heins (2002); Roth (2001a); Beisheim and Zürn (1999).

²⁹ See Klein (2002); Roth (2001a); Walk et al. (2001).

³⁰ See Altvater and Brunnengraber (2002); Gordenker and Weiss (1996); Fisher (1997).

³¹ See Roth (2001a); Smillie (1997); Rode (2004:6).

The role of UN summits concerns both sides. The summits influenced NGOs and NGOs in turn contributed to the world events. However, NGOs are often perceived purely as a means to an end. This becomes especially problematic when focusing on NGOs' advocacy role, where it is crucial that they stay close to the topics or entities that they claim to speak for. Through expression and discussion of a great variety of conflicting positions, contrasting viewpoints, contradictory observations (and even radical positions), real exchange and dialogue evolve and sustainable proposals are developed. NGOs have the ability to influence debates and not only to simply conduct or deliver services.

In the context of the world conferences, NGOs helped the United Nations to open up the policy-setting framework in the 1990s in the sense that they increased public perception, served as observers, reminded official delegates of topics or groups that could easily be forgotten during discussions and, after the events, contributed to the dissemination of the results, debates and ideas. These effects were valued in the sense that additional administrative work for the UN system in the run-up to the conference events was taken into account and arrangements for participation were made. The official perception was that non-state actors were interested in participating and that the United Nations should take care of the arrangements for their participation.

The second argument relates to the issue of power. Whereas opportunities, on the whole, opened up, the extent to which NGOs were capable of using them differed. Some organizations were able to participate in the chain of events leading up to a summit that was relevant to their professional activity. Others, however, were not able to enter the sphere of summits, either for practical reasons such as not having the necessary means, or for fundamental reasons such as not having the necessary information about the processes. Those NGOs able to attend all preparatory meetings or all regional conferences and, thus, become deeply involved in a UN summit process were, in general, mainly based in North America and Europe. How far NGOs could partake in and contribute to the preparatory process of a conference is an issue of power, since that is where decisions are made. Only certain types of NGOs can afford the investment it takes to be active throughout the process. Though a great number of NGOs from all over the world participate in the UN ad hoc conference process, only a few can do so continually. However, a categorization of NGOs by geographical area, or North-South relations, might not be instructive as it overlooks power asymmetries within regional settings. It is possible to find even small NGOs in the South that are well established in the funding community and able to activate these networks to guarantee their involvement in the summits. The borders of political communities could be a possible framework of typical conflicts of concrete actors.³² Thus, it is useful to analyse the internal structure and dynamics of international civil society in detail.³³

What is at stake are mechanisms that guarantee equal opportunity for NGOs to participate in international events even while facing different conditions. While the so far ad hoc approach of the UN system toward NGOs at UN conferences might appear provisional, it nevertheless remains rather lax in terms of preconditions that organizations have to fulfil in order to benefit from the system. The examples presented throughout this paper show that while many organizations all over the world took advantage of the approach, they frequently could not afford to take the extra step from a regional meeting to the world level. So, the challenge for NGOs in the struggle to be heard is to overcome various obstacles—such as a lack of funds for travel, building up and maintaining networks for exchanging information, and producing papers and materials—without it leading to a dependence of smaller NGOs on larger ones.

Besides, it is not possible to identify from a preliminary assessment what may be called “visiting NGOs” at UN summits. These organizations are represented by someone who travels to the event in order to experience the gathering, but not necessarily to actually participate in the event.

³² See Nölke (1997); Brunnengräber and Walk (2001); Klein (2001).

³³ See Wahl (1998); Roth (2001b); Pasha and Blaney (1998).

Equal opportunities, however, are not only of concern to the relations of NGOs with the United Nations, but also within NGO networks themselves. One challenge may be the capability of NGOs to overcome North-South divisions, for example, a labour division. Yet the significance of the “North-South divide” remains ambiguous (de Senillosa 1998); no studies so far have shown the extent of its impact. Clark et al. (1998) give an example of this dilemma when they explain that the sharpest divisions within NGOs are along geographical lines, only to later explain that they may not always be the most important source of conflict. Moreover, the geographical issue overlaps with other persistent divisions. For example, newer small grassroots organizations and big international organizations can differ in management and substantive orientations. It seems to be an oversimplification to assume that the powerful (in whatever dimension) country of origin/headquarters of an NGO would automatically lead to a powerful NGO coming from it, and vice versa. Sadoun (2002) shows, for example, that the composition of activists in three compared thematic areas at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, cannot necessarily be seen on a North-South axis. Whereas advocates and committed people from different parts of the South sometimes work together, there are other cases, for example reparations, where people from the North and South act together.³⁴ Further study will be required to understand mechanisms of power in and between NGOs.

A precondition for improving the role of UN summits as meeting points is that just and equal participation are assured a part of the official event itself. This access is granted on the condition that NGOs from different thematic, regional and other standpoints can get to know each other and subsequently weave connections between each other.

United Nations High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations: Concentrated expertise and complexity

The launch of the United Nations High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations itself implies that the United Nations searches for external assistance and knowledge in order to reform its instruments and bodies. The United Nations was confronted with the initial situation of finding a way of dealing with a large and not clearly defined group of actors that were active at the global level. The main management issue touched upon in the report, therefore, is how the available mass of NGOs with all of its components can be of best use to the United Nations.

In trying to define the two main institutional actors that the panel was set up for, namely the United Nations and civil society, a difficulty of the panel’s work becomes obvious. As the vast literature shows, defining civil society is a tricky undertaking. Many different theoretical, but also pragmatic, considerations play a role. The panel opted to loosely narrow down some groups that can be categorized as non-state actors. However, including local authorities in this definition seems less convincing. Local authorities consist of both elected political representatives and an administrative body. They are neither non-state nor non-governmental actors. On the contrary, they represent the state at the local level. Either they are direct representatives of a centralized government assigned to control certain areas of the state as envoys, or they are part of a fabric of administrative districts—horizontal and vertical—that forms the nation-state. In both cases, local authorities are governmental. Considering them as civil society is also questionable as these authorities are appointed political or administrative entities.

Civil society is a generic term for many different types of organizations. Yet, one could clarify these differences and then talk about other relevant groups besides civil society institutions and gatherings. The same is true for business organizations and parliamentarians. The panel could

³⁴ “North” and “South” are very simplistic categories anyway. These expressions are meant to show that sometimes NGOs come from “rich, industrialized” countries—for example, Australia, Europe and North America—or they are supposed to express the level of democracy in one country. North and South are used as political terms, not as geographical signposts. As such, their value could be questioned as people easily understand different things when using them.

have taken the opportunity to differentiate between groups that have different characteristics, since the substance of their goals and constitutions are just one crucial difference between these groups. Unfortunately, the panel blurred these differences and did not discriminate between different constituted actors. This exercise would have been helpful for adjusting UN policy regarding the groups it deals with.

Thus, the panel's understanding of civil society that includes business, parliamentarians and local authorities goes beyond the UN definition of NGOs. Yet it does not clarify how to handle different groups within civil society in the UN system, nor does it explicitly refer to previous dealings with non-state actors. Instead, for the purposes of communication, it suggests indirectly addressing "network organizations". This assumes that network organizations are representative of their sphere of civil society, which would then imply that civil society is a well-established institutional setting capable of matching the different groups. On the contrary, the precise characteristic of a flexible, floating agglomeration of diverse actors is neglected.

As for the counterpart of the panel's main actors—the United Nations—the experts remain similarly vague. As an established international organization with more than 60 years of history, a detailed look at its role with regard to civil society. The United Nations plays the proactive part in the relationship. It fixes the dates and locations of meetings. NGOs, as part of civil society, try to influence the settings, but do not have the power to decide anything. Therefore, the work shared between the United Nations as an independent organization or as a body of its member states—the nation-states—is of highest relevance for its performance. These issues are critical, but avoided to a large extent in the panel's report. Admittedly, this area is difficult to handle as it touches on a core problem of the United Nations, yet an attempt could have been made.

Regarding the role of NGOs, the panel's report refers to citizens, assuming that NGOs represent them. This should be viewed critically as it is actually the government that represents the citizens, whereas NGOs represent stakeholders in specific fields of interest. The same is true for public opinion, or even global public opinion, which the report cites several times. It sees only NGOs—despite also previously listing other actors, as discussed in this paper—as a means to represent "the person on the street". Yet, NGOs are not "public opinion". And they are not "the real power in the name of the citizens" as the report states. In a democratic system, citizens are the basis for the government; they constitute the foundation for the state system. NGOs cannot substitute for these democratic principals, but can only be complements. And public opinion in the common sense is rejected in public opinion research and is often portrayed in the media. NGOs cannot be used as a yardstick for the interests of citizens worldwide. This would neglect the role of states and many other influencing variables.

At the same time, the report is quite pragmatic. For example, it states that the engagement of others "risks putting more pressure on the Organization's meeting rooms and agendas, which are becoming ever more crowded", and because of this, a more selective, rather than simply increased, engagement is necessary. This argument is surprising if the characterizations of civil society discussed in this paper are taken as accurate.

Under the heading "Depolitizing the accreditation process" (United Nations 2004h:52, 54, paragraph 127), several measures are recommended. From the perspective of the United Nations, the question has to be posed: What added value might this have, given the fact that NGOs are active in a wide range of fields and at various levels within the UN system anyway? In connection with the relatively short discussion of the United Nations as such, the recommendations of the panel could cause harm. Simplifying the accreditation process is surely a good idea, yet it needs to be well planned and thought through. To state that so-called government-operated NGOs should not be allowed to participate may have some merit, but who is able to classify such NGOs? And what kind of documents would NGOs need to show in order to be accredited? How much governmental contact and of what kind—financial, thematic, organizational, personal and so on—would an NGO be allowed? In fact, almost every NGO

depends on collaboration with the government in one way or another. In many countries, NGOs need to be officially registered by a ministry to be allowed to be active. Often, NGOs receive financial support from governments or their ministries. The borders are fluid.

Finally, the panel's statement on UN summits is unsurprising, given the "conference fatigue" felt by all participants from the late 1990s on. Nonetheless, the implications of small, well-defined meetings (also panels) with respect to an open, public debate are not elaborated in detail. The panel's focus on managerial instead of political arguments where conflicts, interests and power emerge and are seen, leads to a kind of de-politicizing of NGOs as civil society actors, which should be discussed and not taken for granted. The United Nations is a political body as are its gatherings, such as UN summits. The United Nations offers a unique opportunity for political actors to discuss important topics of international relations, from world peace to environmental issues to humanitarian, social and legal areas. In this framework, it would be suitable to consider representatives of NGOs as political representatives of a new kind.

The Millennium Summit and NGO participation

The organizational arrangements for the Millennium Summit stand in contrast to those of previous UN summits. The UN summits for human rights, women, environment and on many other issues took measures, in varying degrees, to ensure the participation of civil society delegates. Yet, what was practised during the Millennium Summit and repeated five years later was a different matter. For the 2000 summit, the NGO events were entirely separate (in time and place) from the main events. NGOs were not within reach of the conference where high-level representatives of state and the United Nations met. Instead, a separate meeting was arranged months before the official gathering. This represents a step backward in NGO/civil society participation at a UN summit, especially when the NGO forum prior to a meeting was a colourful *omnium gatherum*, sometimes standing in contrast to the official, sober diplomatic UN conference participants. And given that the registration process influences conference composition to a great extent, the UN events, or unofficial hearings, were limited to a selection of civil society and other entities' representatives. The vivid mix of committed people who struggled to come to the event was limited by this procedure. Without access to the UN meeting at all, the two-day NGO hearing in New York lost its relevance.

Interestingly, the Millennium Summit, which made important promises for the new millennium, had a relatively short preparation phase. Thus, opportunities for NGOs to get involved and become aware of the debates that were deemed relevant for the UN system and the development agenda were limited. Likewise, the extremely short preparation phase of the 2005 World Summit, with the date decided only eight months in advance, gave little time for regional and thematic meetings that could allow adequate participation by various stakeholders.

NGOs and their networks were alarmed at the way the 2005 World Summit arrangements took shape between autumn 2004 and spring 2005, and tried to influence the decisions concerning their right to participate. Drawing upon the lesson of the Millennium Summit, this time some NGOs, led by committed leaders, tried to ensure more than minimal involvement of civil society representatives. In a letter to the Secretary-General, they tried to convince him of the necessity of working in closer cooperation with non-governmental entities. They argued that this would help to ensure widespread support for the MDGs and other results of the conference. Yet, their efforts did not bear fruit, and the separation of official delegates and delegates from non-state institutions was preserved.

Moreover, the topics of discussions were prescribed by means of UN reports prepared by the Secretary-General. These reports were the result of wide consultations and other conferences. Also, for the NGO events organized by the United Nations and taking place at the General Assembly of the United Nations headquarters in New York, the topics were identified in

advance. In contrast to former events, organizations that were unwilling to subsume their special fields of activity as relevant to the overall topic were no longer invited, instead only those that seemed relevant to the given topics were included. Therefore, the complexity of organizations and with it, new associations of topics not previously seen as interdependent, were lost. These restrictions and detailed instructions of what to speak about limited the value of NGO participation.

Underlying the new arrangements for participation is the perceived value of NGOs as actors in the international UN policy-making process. Symptomatic of this is the listing of individuals (well known within the international policy-making scene) on lists of participants, but not their organizations. NGOs are not seen as serious bodies in their respective field of interest and geographical area of action, but are limited to selected individuals worth being invited as speakers or “active participants”.

The system takes on a life of its own

Experiences of UN world conferences during the 1970s, and especially during the 1990s, led to in-depth study of the United Nations–civil society relationship; first, an internal (United Nations) research effort entailing the compilation of relevant documents, then the convocation of the high-level panel on civil society. Yet arrangements for the 2005 World Summit illustrate the widening gap between the theory and practice of NGO participation in UN policy-making processes. Probably for reasons of efficacy from the point of view of the UN bodies, the process of a UN world conference became more streamlined. This was at the expense of a variety of opportunities for external actors, and for strengthening of regional bodies of the UN system itself. Processes are more centralized when New York is chosen as the location for organizing the meetings. It is surprising to see the United Nations moving toward centralization, especially when the UN’s development agenda and other international development agencies emphasize the importance of decentralized, regional and local structures.

The empowerment of civil society in its diversity is thrust into the background when the United Nations takes care of the arrangements for NGO parallel meetings, apparently without the inclusion of non-governmental entities, except for well-established NGO networks. The system of caucuses, where small groups of NGOs can discuss certain issues they share, is avoided. An invitation system removes the self-selection of participants, with its inherent defect of overlooking those that are not as strong, powerful or financially well equipped. The selection process has been removed to a smaller circle of decision makers.

Combining all conferences, whose topics had each previously filled at least a one-week gathering of world representatives to discuss their relevance, and the MDGs, which were the outcome of the Millennium Summit in 2000, ran the risk of losing depth of content. Since the final document of a conference cannot exceed a certain number of pages—the MDGs are restricted to eight main messages—priorities had to be set and details left out. On the one hand, the sum-up offers a tidy, compact outcome; on the other hand, it offers little space for new, innovative ideas that could eventually evolve from an event such as a UN world summit.

In the final analysis, the United Nations needs CSOs in order to upgrade its legitimacy. This should encourage NGOs and other CSOs to take part actively in discussions about the conditions of participation. NGOs need to determine whether it is worth spending energy, time and resources to support United Nations policy events that grant them a marginal role, keeping them at a distance and overruling practices that were previously followed. Becoming more “effective”, from the United Nations’ point of view, could endanger participatory standards that were reached in the last decade of world summits. Yet, it might also present the opportunity for NGOs to better organize themselves. NGOs are now mainly reacting to developments such as the conferences or MDGs, and do not show a truly independent attitude. As Drainville puts it, NGOs are

working to synthesize solutions into portable, workable plans. Sanctified, captured and cornered, they work with assigned purpose, negotiating and drafting agendas. Sometimes, they are rewarded for their initiative by visits from an appointed authority (2004:138).

To be taken seriously, it is of utmost importance for NGOs to reflect their qualities and goals as well as the best means to reach them.

7. Conclusion

Must the diminishing importance of UN summits as a style of international policy making lead to the conclusion that we will see the end of these summits? Access to a conference is the first step in participation. By raising their voices, a great variety of groups have the opportunity to frame topics. This could lead to a broad exchange of thoughts, ideas and plans and is in itself a creation of space for freedom of expression. Conversely, it could also lead to further strengthening already well-known and experienced organizations and speakers. And, in turn, the participation of these non-state actors could change the character of a summit—from being an event where high-level government representatives and diplomats come together to discuss urgent topics behind closed doors, the conference is confronted with various representatives who demand not only to hear the conversations, but also to contribute to them.

In fact, at the most recent conferences, the arrangements and practices indicate that the will or interest to serve and be financed by the UN system has weakened the infrastructure of huge conferences. As a result, participatory arenas for non-state actors, and civil society actors in particular, were less taken care of and facilitated. However, the UN system has not closed its gates to non-state actors, and new modalities have arisen. Yet NGOs are kept at a distance. The wrangling through the bureaucracy, forms, arrangements and restrictions that was characteristic for most NGO involvement in the 1990s is less apparent today. Maybe as a by-product of an attitude that focuses on effectiveness, clear and binding rules and complete registration of the UN system's many parts, the sometimes chaotic, unconventional participatory ways of the past have been increasingly abandoned.

Politics is about power, contestation, struggles and compromises. It is about actions in definite places at given times. NGOs as political actors need to get involved with the structures, while retaining space for diverse voices. In this spirit and in regard to previous experience, it might be time for an efficient moderated system. Special mechanisms could ensure that everyone who has something to say has the opportunity to do so. Still, the assumption holds that those NGO delegates who are best equipped and well experienced might occupy the biggest space, regardless of the quality or the urgency of their concerns. Thus, moderator(s) should be neutral when facilitating discussions, set limits on speaking times and enforce fair regulations. Individuals need to be found for this position who are not themselves actively involved in the thematic field as has been the case in many experiences with moderation during NGO events at world conferences in the past. These individuals should have a professional background that enables them to moderate huge events with groups of diverse and enthusiastic actors.

The experiences and the recommendations derived from this do not seem to be consistent. They are now a patchwork of possibilities; future conventions will show what works and what needs to be improved. NGOs, as one actor in the international scene, should be aware of ongoing discussions in this regard in order to be active in shaping future arrangements. On the new ways established so far, not everyone knows how to walk or can find their way.

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