

Brunch
“We the peoples' in the UN system: participation in practice?”
July 2004

The Speaker, from the UN, opened his speech with a guitar and vocals rendition of the song "From a distance". He emphasised that NGOs seek to influence, not conquer, political power. NGOs served to hold governments to account for decisions taken at the international level, and the degree to which this could be construed as usurping government power was debatable. He asserted that there were three main types of relations in the international system: formal/ceremonial, involving speeches and statements; cooperative, covering such areas as participation in panels, as well as increasingly operational roles for NGOs in the implementation of projects; and "loyal opposition", seeking to strengthen the core UN (not WTO, IMF or World Bank), and empowering it by challenging delegates to be more transparent and accountable. The opening of consultative status to national NGOs, while not retrogressive per se, had opened the door to a number of organisations not necessarily supportive of the UN, or necessarily capable of being effective. Some important trends were the expansion of coalitions of NGOs; "type 2" partnerships of informal collaborations among NGOs and governments ; and the decrease in the resources available to the UN, which was "starving it into reform". He noted the recent UN Panel on Participation of Civil Society Actors, and suggested that the future would be one of the UN playing a global parliamentary role, a forum which brings together the public opinion power of NGOs, the economic power of the private sector and the political power of governments, , with growing local government and parliamentary participation. The UN would have to prove that it had the capability to be a forum for discussing alternatives.

The following are highlights of discussion from the floor:

- There is debate on whether there is a net benefit to having expanded participation of NGOs, the essence of the issue being one of the relevance of the UN mechanisms, since participation will have the greatest impact where political power, and therefore relevance, is exercised

- With respect to opportunities to contribute to shaping the nature of civil society participation, it was noted that the procedure adopted in follow-up to the Cardoso Panel involved UN secretariat and intergovernmental consultations, both internally, with possible meetings for staff organized by Mr. Ricardo Espinoza, and externally, led by Ms. Marta Maras, with governments and other agencies. Outcomes would feed into reporting by the UN Secretary-General to the General Assembly in autumn. For NGOs, one entry point could be the NGLS/CONGO discussions on the Cardoso Report, scheduled for 26 July.

- Key emerging concerns identified among civil society actors as consultative status is extended, were the increasing number of "GONGOs", that is "government organized" NGOs; the need to enhance the credibility of UN through improved links with the anti-globalisation movement; the need to examine the legitimacy of faith-based organisations; and the increasing difficulties faced by NGOs in obtaining consultative status as the threat of terrorism tightens security criteria

- With respect to the UN agenda being increasingly driven by donors through larger proportions of earmarked funds, it was stressed that that insistence on earmarked funds was indeed not in the interest of multilateralism. The UN needed to assert that it was not value-neutral, but values-based, and that its authority was derived from this. While the idea of an independent UN secretariat had waned, it was meant to communicate the truth, regardless of how unpalatable it was.

- In terms of adopting different models of participation, such as the tripartite ILO model of government/employers/ worker, there are slow movements in this direction, with experimentation involving NGOs in new domains of decision-making such as advisory-type boards in UNHCR, UNDP and UNICEF.