



Track 1 – United Nations: A More Democratic... And Stronger UN !

REPORT ON THE UN TRACK at Global Governance 2002 (G02) Montréal, October 13-16, 2002

The G02 Conference « UN Track » advocates for a clear acknowledgement of the primacy of UN accords over those of any other international bodies

Entitled “United Nations: A More Democratic...And Stronger UN!”, the first track of the Global Governance 2002 (G02) conference examined, on Monday, October 14, issues related to the evolving role of the UN in global governance and policy options and strategies to strengthen collaboration between the UN and civil society in democratizing global governance. This conference was organized and hosted in Montreal from 13 to 16 October 2002 by the Montreal International Forum (FIM), an international think tank specialized on the relationships between civil society and multilateral institutions.

Report on key results, conclusions and next steps of “UN Track” at the concluding plenary session (Wednesday, October 16)

During the conference’s concluding session, the Coordinator of its UN Track, Mario Lavoie, emphasized that even if the debates and exchange of views were not meant to produce a consensus document, some key priority action areas for civil society surfaced from track deliberations.

First, Track participants strongly endorsed that the critical need in their work, and at every level of involvement, to advocate and defend, in a sustained and systematic manner, the primacy of the United Nations accords and treaties about human rights and environment over any other multilateral accords, including those related to trade, investment and private property.

Secondly, it was agreed that civil society organizations must strengthen both their efficiency and impact through learning from the success stories that some of them have experienced through citizens’ diplomacy in the UN system, especially in strategic areas like the creation of an International Criminal Court and the approval of a Biosafety Protocol. Participants encouraged civil society organizations to bank and build on such precedents in order to succeed in transforming and democratizing global governance and in challenging the « unilateral power » that a few countries and institutions are seeking to impose to the world, especially the United States.

Thirdly, Track participants agreed to counter any forms of attacks against democracy that would come from the business sector. In order to do so, they recommended that Civil Society develop at several levels collaborative responses to anti-democratic corporate challenges, especially in the schools, in electoral processes, and through trying hard to influence critical international negotiations, such as those on services at the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Plenary Panel (Monday, October 14): *Civil Society, the UN and Democratizing Global Governance: Overcoming the Forces Undermining UN Authority*

In a UN Track opening plenary on Monday morning, a panel set the context for the rest of the day in relation to the theme: Civil Society, the UN and Democratizing Global Governance, Overcoming the Forces Undermining UN Authority. John Langmore, currently Director of the International Labour Organization's UN Liaison Office in New York (and former Director of the UN Division for Social Policy and Development) endorsed the recommendation to establish an Economic and Social Security Council. A first feasible step, not requiring a reform of the UN Charter, would be for the President of the General Assembly to invite heads of governments of the GA's General Committee (28 members) to assume this role. In the short term, he also proposes that ECOSOC meet whenever an issue merits its attention, instead of once a year.

To address the "asymmetrical and unequal" governance of both the IMF and World Bank, Mr. Langmore recommended increasing the voting rights of developing countries to take into account the fact that the borrowers are providing a large part of these institutions' income. He also underlined the needs for major new financial resources to fund economic and social programmes aimed at reaching Millennium Development Goals, through debt reduction, increased ODA, and an international transaction tax or a carbon tax administered on a national basis. They would not necessarily require universal agreement to be feasible, he said. In order for civil society organizations to increase their influence and to speak with more authority at the UN, he suggested that they develop solid expertise and maintain permanent representatives in New York or Geneva.

Alfredo Sfeir-Younis, World Bank Special Representative to the WTO and the UN in Geneva, insisted that imposing a one country one vote rule to the World Bank would not be a panacea nor necessarily a way to democratize it, while there is still no democracy at the national level in many countries. He admitted, though, that Africa is currently an under-represented continent in the World Bank's Board. In his view, in a context of complementarity of mandates among world institutions, rules of governance, alone, cannot replace performance as a measure of effectiveness. "The system will be measured by its delivery", he said. In order to reform multilateralism, he believes that both the private sector and civil society must be present in international institutions.

Like Mr. Desai (opening conference keynote earlier the same day), Mr. Sfeir-Younis emphasized that global governance is largely about values, including those of citizenship and sovereignty. He also noted that, nowadays, there is mistrust about practically everything, from the UN to governments, and not only about the World Bank. As a World Bank representative to the UN for seven years, he said that he came very soon to appreciate the UN's central role on a wide range of key issues, including peace and social affairs. He also revealed that the World Bank provides free access to satellite communications to indigenous peoples to allow them to communicate with each other, and has funded so far some 83,000 NGO projects worldwide.

The third panelist, Roberto Bissio, Director of Social Watch, an international civil society network based in Uruguay, identified as a first priority for world democratization to restrict the mandate of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which "is becoming a world government". In his view, WTO captures the governments to serve transnational corporations at the very time when, following the recent Enron-type of scandals, the corporations are not viewed as the

“good guys” anymore. His second priority is to reform the Bretton-Woods institutions which, he feels, increasingly dictate rules to governments.

His third priority would be to find ways to make the UN relevant for the ordinary people. For instance, on the issue of compliance of UN international treaties like those on Human Rights, M. Bissio notes that nothing happens to those countries that violate them, compared to the situation of those that stop paying their debt to an international financial institution, in which cases there are real costs involved for states which default.

Participants of this plenary raised questions and issues on the following: the hierarchy between international institutions; UN’s inadequate use of information technologies to make documents available at no cost; the insufficient place of youth and worker’s unions in international institutions; the erosion of UN’s authority by governments themselves when they do not implement what they have agreed in Summits and conventions; the promotion of privatization of government services by IFIs; the dilemma of reforming the UN Charter versus making the best of the existing one.

A. Workshop (Monday, October 14): Civil Society and UN Reform: Core Institutions and Promising Proposals in Democratization

On Monday afternoon, a workshop entitled “Civil Society and UN Reform: Core Institutions and Promising Proposals in Democratization” mainly discussed on the basis of a commissioned paper drafted by John W. Foster, Researcher at the Ottawa-based North-South Institute, presenting a survey of ideas to reform and strengthen the UN through its relationships with non-state actors.

The workshop has agreed on the following principles: the existence of disfunctionalities in the current system of global governance; about concerns of representativity in the UN system; the need to give more voice to people in the UN system; the necessity to make gender equity an integral part of the process of UN reform; ensure that the UN will cease remaining stuck, especially through its Security Council’s five permanent members, with the geopolitics of 1945, and; reform the UN as part of a larger reform of all international organizations, in order to move from national democracies to a genuine international one.

But workshop participants could not come to a consensus on the idea promoted in the Foster Paper of creating a UN Global People’s Assembly. Several participants were enthusiastically supporting this idea, either alongside the UN or to make the UN become a sort of bicameral world parliament, while other considered that this would not be feasible as long as there would not be democracies everywhere. Someone proposed, as a preliminary step, before the UN Charter could eventually be amended, to implement a world parliament with citizens groups, a solution that neither made consensus.

The workshop was briefed about the NGO Coalition for an International Criminal Court, a world coalition which succeeded through cooperating with like-minded States and agencies in having this court established this year. Many concluded that this ‘success story’ deserves to be better known as lessons from it could inform and inspire other initiatives. All participants showed deep concerns, though, about the US bids to exempt its citizens from being sued before the Court, a trend labeled “US exceptionalism”.

B. Workshop (Monday, October 14): Bridging the Implementation Gap: Civil Society and the Potential of the Millennium Goals

The basic premise for the workshop was that democratic global governance will only be possible if agreements and targets agreed upon in the more democratic and inclusive multilateral frameworks like the UN institutions, are ultimately implemented. Its participants recognized that the most critical summit agreements on human development targets currently are the UN Millennium Development Goals, even if some argued that some targets do not go far enough.

The workshop on Millennium Development Goals examined the stakes related to their legitimacy, through taking into account the non-participative process (excluding civil society) for their approval. The Objectives on poverty (i.e. halving the number of poor and this, only in poorest countries, while richer countries and those that already reached this target do not have to report any more) were viewed by some participants as a clear step back compared to the 1995 Copenhagen Summit, whose official goal was the « eradication » of poverty. It was also noted that poor countries are becoming reluctant to approve any new international accord on any subject, while they increasingly consider such accords as new forms of « conditionalities » imposed on them, and as ways to reinforce the existing North-South imbalance.

In spite of the Millennium Development Goals' shortcomings, participants agreed that civil society really should provide its best efforts to make these Goals become much better known worldwide. They indicated that civil society should use these Goals as development levers, and devote every effort to ensure that governments will reach them. Workshop participants proposed to use Millennium Goals as concrete tools in their poverty reduction efforts, through promoting a « vertical » integration of their interventions in order to link their actions on the field at the national level to policy-making at the international level. These objectives might also be linked to other on-going actions and mechanisms targeting International Financial Institutions, in the fight against poverty or for debt reduction, for instance. The workshop also insisted on the need for inter-sectoral collaboration, especially in addressing the challenge of cooperating with the business sector, while continuing to counter any attempt to privatize services and through engaging and mobilizing marginalized people.

C. Workshop (Monday, October 14): Democratization from the Bottom-Up: Perspectives on Making the UN More Relevant in the Development Process

Participants of this workshop examined the experience of working with the UN and UN agencies from the national and regional levels. One promising national experience presented at the workshop was the multi-stakeholders approach used in The Philippines, which provides interesting innovations in engaging civil society, including rural communities, in policy development.

There were analyses of the evolution from approaches where development approaches were decided by outsiders towards one focusing on capacity-building instead. Faced with different agencies and sectoral priorities and programmes, the notion of “livelihoods” was proposed and discussed as a concept that can help to better coordinate interventions and that is likely to have important implications on international institutions.

The workshop insisted that local authorities must become better acknowledged by international institutions to represent local concerns on the international scene, especially given the existence of a richness of partnerships between civil society and local authorities.

D. Workshop (Monday, October 14): Democratizing Economic Global Governance: What role for the UN and Civil Society vis-à-vis the International Financial Institutions (IFIs)

This workshop examined how the UN and civil society could assume a role in democratizing the International Financial Institutions (IFI) and in making them become more accountable. Participants also emphasized the key role that Civil Society Organizations can play in encouraging national governments to respect their own commitments.

Workshop participants largely noted that civil society is rather mistrustful vis-à-vis IFIs, and admitted that such an attitude somewhat prevents civil society organizations to engage itself in pushing for further changes in these institutions. The workshop acknowledged that a continuum towards change does exist within IFIs, but stated that this movement partly results from the pressures exerted from outside by civil society.

Participants endorsed the Foster paper's suggestions about the need for civil society to promote spaces for more discussions and exchanges between the UN and IFIs, then allowing development to follow paths which would not necessarily be those advocated by IFIs.

Another conclusion was a clear willingness of Workshop participants to pursue in the future such frank discussions between representatives of civil society, the UN and IFIs about seeking ways to democratize further the International Financial Institutions.

Special Plenary (Wednesday, October 16 AM): *Challenges for Transnational Civil Society in Democratizing Global Governance: Five Main Challenges for Civil Society in Dealing With the UN*

On Wednesday morning, 16 October, there was a special integrating plenary session during which the conference's Track Coordinators provided summaries of key strategies for civil society emerging from the conference. Mario Lavoie, Coordinator of the 'UN Track', presented the following five challenges which emerged from this section of the conference.

#1 - The challenge of 'thinking globally and acting globally'

This is the challenge of intervening on macro-policy issues at multiple entry points in the multilateral system to defend the principle of giving predominance to international law and to the UN's existing treaties.

On the policy front, civil society should collectively put pressure to ensure that the UN's existing treaties and agreements on human rights, social progress and environmental protection gain primacy on any other international agreements. The existing UN Charter provides ground for that, while its Article 103 states that in the event of a conflict between the obligations of the Members of the UN under the Charter and their obligations under any other international agreement, « their obligations under the present Charter shall prevail ». The

Article 55 also clearly promotes social progress and human rights as necessary conditions for international security. Based on these, civil society should make clear that UN agreements must have more weight than any other international accord, including those of the World Trade Organization. Civil society should advocate for a restructuration of the international governance institutions and keep a special stake in supporting the UN's role within it.

Strategically and organizationally, this implies taking on the simultaneous tasks of conducting and coordinating civil society efforts to advance democratic governance at multiple levels, while continuing to develop its own specific role and influence in the UN system. This also involves a number of related components such as reinforcing its own capacity, divide labour and build efficient coalitions in order to better influence multilateral institutions.

#2 - The challenge of building inclusiveness and democratic representation within civil society

The second challenge is about civil society's inclusiveness and legitimate representation as part of reforming the UN core institutions. While the « UN Track » could not come to any consensus about the creation of a UN Peoples' Assembly, participants agreed for seeking a more inclusive people-based representation in the UN institutions. Many emphasized the need to give a much stronger voice to marginalized people and to better take demography into account. Civil society has also the responsibility to invent for itself the global models and mechanisms of legitimate and democratic representations that can be both credible and functioning.

#3 - The challenge of deepening 'vertical integration'

The credibility and impact of civil society's (CS) advocacy work at the global level is also challenged by the insufficient CS efforts conducted at the local and national levels on the implementation and monitoring of UN agreements and plans of action. Civil society must take advantage of existing opportunities, such as using the Millennium Goals for example, to bridge this 'vertical' gap and strengthen feedback loops and learning cycles between global advocacy efforts and country-level work.

#4 - The challenge of bridging 'sectoral silos'

This challenge in relation to CS networks and actors in global governance is to deepen and strengthen multistakeholder dialogue and decision-making experiments and approaches and make them more genuine and effective. Successful experiences at the local level in many countries, including where CS - local governments collaboration has been productive, have demonstrated the value and potential benefits of multistakeholder approaches. Conceptually bridging 'sectoral silos' also challenges civil society organizations and their respective partners in multilateral agencies to work and collaborate beyond their respective area of specialization or expertise in development. The concept of 'livelihoods' offers a vehicle to integrate and articulate the different efforts in advancing human development while respecting respective roles, expertise and contributions.

#5 - The challenge of “learning to learn” from each other

Civil society networks should better foster “horizontal integration” of knowledge and know-how with a view of improving its capacity to mobilize and to impact on global policy-making. This means, for instance, that civil society organizations from every sector should learn from key successes in citizen diplomacy in two strategic areas, such as the International Criminal Court and the Biosafety Protocol. Building such a capacity across institutional and sectoral divisions is critical in order for the global civil society to play a key and efficient role in democratizing global governance and in challenging “unilateral power”.

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October 2002

NOTE

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Background Paper for Track:	John Foster, North-South Institute