

The United Nations And Non - Governmental Organisations: Turkish Experience

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Introduction

Representatives of independent citizen organisations are increasingly active in policy making at the United Nations. These organisations - known at the UN as "non-governmental organisations" or "NGOs" - are often the most effective voices for the concerns of ordinary people in the international arena. NGOs include the most outspoken advocates of human rights, the environment, social programmes, women's rights and more.

Non-governmental organisations have a constantly growing role in national and international life, whether it is for promoting democracy, guaranteeing rights and freedoms, saving the environment, promoting sustainable development, setting technical and professional standards, galvanising educational and cultural renewal, or ensuring the survival of victims of man-made and natural disasters.

The relationship between NGOs and the UN System has been one of the phenomena of the last 50 years, building on and greatly expanding the experience acquired with the League of Nations, before 1939. This relationship exists so that all efforts are directed towards making the world better, safer, cleaner and healthier - a world where all have opportunity to live out their lives in justice. Those are the goals of the UN; those are the goals of the non-governmental community.

As the former Under-Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Desai once put it, "NGOs... no longer simply have a consumer relationship with the United Nations. They have increasingly assumed the role of promoters of new ideas, they have alerted the world community to emerging issues,

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and they have developed expertise and talent which... have become vital for the work of the United Nations, both at the policy and operational levels".

The ECOSOC Committee on NGOs perhaps plays the most important role in strengthening the UN-NGO relations. Turkey's membership in and Chairmanship of this Committee left a indelible mark in this process.

The author has drawn on NGOs substantial archives. More importantly, perhaps, she has drawn heavily on the experience of her own personal participation in NGO activities, with over 25 years' experience, as well as on the information and ideas provided by many other individuals who have been involved, in one way or another, in the connections between the UN and the NGO community. I am grateful to them, and honour their contributions.

Background

As a background, it may be helpful to offer a brief sketch of UN-NGO relations as they have developed over the past 60 years.

Article 71 of the UN Charter provides that the UN Economic and Social Council could establish "suitable arrangements for consultation" with NGOs. This is the cornerstone of the UN-NGO relationship.

An important moment in the history of this relationship, on the part of the NGOs, was the creation in 1948 of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations in Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council, commonly known as CONGO. For nearly 60 years this coordinating body has served as a watchdog of NGO interests in the consultative system and as a framework for NGO cooperation in a number of fields of common interest.

By the 1990s it was inconceivable for the UN to plan any global event without the active involvement of the non-governmental sector. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali, addressing NGO representatives at the UN in September 1994, made this very clear when he said:

"I want you to consider this your home. Until recently, these words might have caused astonishment. The United Nations was considered to be a forum for sovereign states alone. Within the space of a few short years, this attitude has changed. Non-governmental organisations are now considered full participants in international life".

It is pertinent to recall the variety of relationships, which have developed over the years and the benefits - to both the UN and the NGOs - that the

experience of earlier decades has made indisputable. From the UN point of view;

1) NGOs can provide expert knowledge and advice, both to the decision-making bodies of the UN, and to the Secretariat which implements UN decisions;

2) NGOs can present the views of important constituencies whose voices may not be adequately represented by national delegations but whose views are important for informed decision-making;

3) NGOs can be major channels for dissemination of information to their members, thus helping to fill the knowledge gap left by the inadequate coverage given by the media to UN developments;

4) NGOs can build support for UN programmes by carrying out educational activities directed at the wider public (the promotion of various "days" proclaimed by UN agencies e.g. World Food Day) or by raising funds (e.g. for UNICEF);

5) In some cases close cooperation with NGOs is indispensable to UN agencies in carrying out their missions; the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, for example, contracts and cooperates extensively with NGOs in the majority of refugee situations. And the UNDP has designated certain NGOs as executing agencies for projects, which it funds.

Civil Society is "the sphere in which social movements organize themselves around objectives, constituencies, and thematic interests". Civil society is itself composed of "major groups" who reflect those various interests.

The relationship between the UN and civil society is as old as the Organisation itself. The representatives of the NGOs, serving as advisors, were already present at the drafting work of the UN Charter. The UN Charter provides provision for the continuation of this special relationship, which flourished steadily over the years, through the consultative arrangement with the ECOSOC. However, it is safe to say that the most dramatic and widespread growth and empowerment of civil society organisations have actually taken place in the 1990s, in parallel, with the momentous changes in the world scene. National and international decision makers have come to recognise the influence of the steadily expanding and increasingly active NGO sector.

Similarly, over the past decade there have been significant changes in the relationship of NGOs with the UN and in particular with the ECOSOC. NGOs along with other major civil society groups have now become indispensable "partners." In

Secretary-General Annan's words: "The UN once dealt only with Governments. But now we know that peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnerships involving governments, international organisations, the business community, and civil society. In today's world we depend on each other."

The Consultative Relationship

The consultative relationship has remained at the heart of the interaction. During the early 1990s the existing pattern of this relationship came under increasing scrutiny.

A central issue, of course, is which organisations shall be accorded status with the UN. General Assembly Resolution 1996/31 governs the consultative relationship between the United Nations and NGOs. Among the principles to be applied in the establishment of consultative relations are stipulations that:

"The organisation shall be concerned with matters falling within the competence of the Economic and Social Council... The aims and purposes of the organisation shall be in conformity with the spirit, purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations... The organisation shall undertake to support the work of the United Nations and to promote knowledge of its principles and activities... The organisation shall be of representative character and of recognized international standing... The organisation shall have an established headquarters, with an executive officer. It shall have a democratically adopted constitution... which shall provide for determination of policy... by a representative body... The basic resources of the organisation shall be derived in the main part from contributions of the national affiliates... or from individual members."

Non-governmental, non-profit voluntary organisations can be admitted into consultative status with the Council if they meet the requirements detailed in Council resolution 1996/31, regarding matters, including the organisation's activities, decision-making processes and resources.

There are provisions for classifying organisations into three categories. Different privileges and obligations are accorded to each category. General Consultative Status is intended for NGOs concerned with most of the activities of ECOSOC that are broadly representative of society in different regions of the world. Once accorded that status, NGOs can propose items for ECOSOC's agenda, attend and speak at its meetings and circulate statements at the UN. Organisations concerned with only a few of the fields of ECOSOC's activity may be considered for Special Consultative Status, which would allow them to attend

meetings and circulate statements. Finally, Roster Status is accorded to those NGOs which can make occasional and useful contributions to ECOSOC or to other United Nations bodies. Roster Status NGOs can attend meetings and are available for consultation at the ECOSOC's request.

Non-governmental organisations with General and Special consultative status must submit a report to ECOSOC every four years (referred to as a Quadrennial Report). The Committee can request a special report in certain instances, such as after receipt of a complaint from a Member State about the behaviour of an NGO during a meeting of a United Nations body to which it was accredited.

The ECOSOC Committee

The Committee on NGOs, a standing body of the Economic and Social Council established in 1946, considers applications submitted by NGOs for consultative status and their requests for reclassification. It also considers quadrennial reports submitted by those organisations, implements the provisions of resolution 1996/31 and the monitoring of consultative relationships; and considers other issues as requested by the Council. The Committee comprises 19 members.

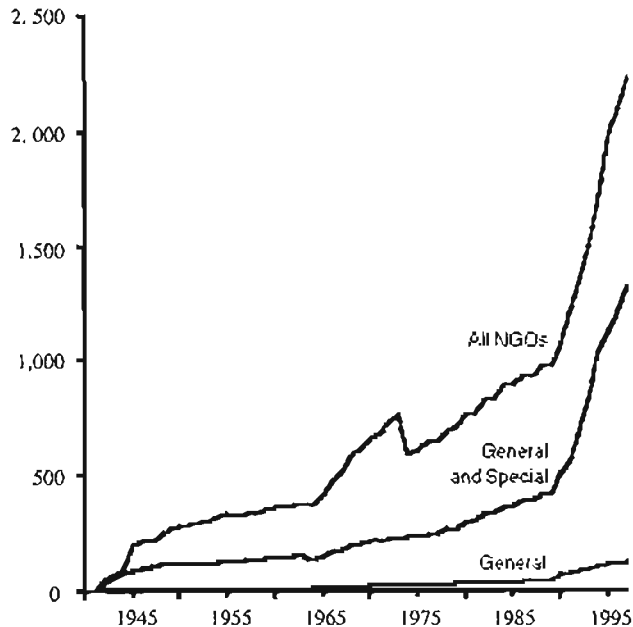
The established practice, for an organisation seeking accreditation has been for it (the NGO) to submit an application to ECOSOC's Committee on Non-Governmental Organisations. Once approved by the Committee, ECOSOC's subsequent approval has, in most cases, been *pro forma*.

Turkey's Chairmanship of the Committee

The Chairmen of the Committee, who are instrumental, in many ways, in strengthening UN-NGO relations, serve for two years. In May 2000, a Turkish diplomat was elected to this post by unanimous vote. The next two years witnessed an unprecedented intensity of work.

To gain a sense of the number of applications received during the period of Turkey's Chairmanship, let's review some data. The Committee had received 400 new NGO applications for consultative status in 1999; that number increased to more than 800 in 2000; and in 2002 over 1,000 applications were processed (see the graph below). As requests for consultative status increased, the Committee's sessions expanded from two weeks to five weeks, and this did not include time for informal meetings.

GRAPH 1: The Growth in the Number of ECOSOC NGOs (1945 to 2002)



When he took over the Chairmanship, Levent Bilman of Turkey, was determined that there needed to be a change in the Committees' approach to the review process, in the face of this increase. First, he asked the Committee to respond to the challenge by developing practical measures. Consequently:

1. More effective usage of informal meetings held before the official sessions was made. This provided the Committee members with an advance picture on the work ahead.

2. A work schedule chart, introduced by the Chairman, eased the Committees work and also enabled NGO representatives to see the programme more clearly.

3. In order to help the Committee make speedy progress NGOs were contacted bilaterally in order to clarify certain aspects of the applications at hand. Thus, a more transparent approach was adopted.

4. Small working groups were formed to address complicated matters.

5. To eliminate the growing backlog of applications the Committee allocated one session, almost in its entirety, to deal only with deferred applications.

6. With the purpose of streamlining, the Committee developed a practice of closing files without prejudice to the NGO concerned.

Under Turkey's Chairmanship, the NGO Committee accredited an impressive number of NGOs. In fact, the Committee was able to recommend status to more NGOs than ever before. Over the course of its 2000 and 2001 regular and resumed sessions the Committee had 97 formal meetings and, among other issues, reviewed 419 applications and 228 quadrennial reports received from NGOs. In just two sessions, 189 organisations were recommended for consultative status. Fifty of those, who obtained consultative status came from countries with developing economies or economies in transition.

During Turkey's two-year Chairmanship, the Committee was also able to achieve substantial progress in increasing the effectiveness of this UN body. One reason for this may have been the Chairman's strategic approach to the programme of work. There was excellent cooperation with the Secretariat and steady efforts to improve efficiency. Secondly, it was the Working Group established by the Chairman. The Working Group was instrumental in resolving many important issues. One achievement of great significance was the drafting of a new application questionnaire. The existing questionnaire, which had been in use for years, had left some critical questions unanswered. The result of the Working Group's efforts was the production of a better focused paper, which brought more clarity to the review process of the Committee.

The Committee also took up other aspects of its work, which had not been adequately addressed in the past. In this context, the Committee was able to review and resolve some of the cases that were placed in the so-called "grey area"; made great progress concerning those NGOs, which are on the CSD roster. On the other hand, among the NGOs approved for status, was the "Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations (CONGO) in consultative relationship with the United Nations". At the request of the Committee, after more than 50 years, CONGO finally regularised its own relationship with the UN.

Although the UN-NGO Section had achieved progress and improved its working methods, a lot still remained to be done. The Section's workload continued to grow and diversify. It would have to call upon all its resources and devise innovative ways to continue the mutually beneficial relationship between the Council and the community of NGOs. The Section had reached a point where the

number of incoming applications had overwhelmed the Section's capacity to deal with them. The record increase in new applications was partly due to a surge of organisations seeking accreditation for events related to the new millennium. On human resource requirements, the General Assembly had decided to strengthen the capacity of the NGO Section in the second half of 2000-2001. During a two week resumed session in January 2001, the Committee concluded that in order to continue to operate with the same level of efficiency, the Secretariat had to be strengthened.

On the other hand, while dealing with the applications and quadrennials, the Committee accommodated between 16 - 27 NGO representatives per session, who came to attend the meetings in order to respond to the questions of the Committee members. This was a unique approach and represented a record achievement.

During the Chairmanship of Turkey, another major development concerned the interaction with the other UN organs. Exchange of letters and holding of meetings with the President of CHR (Commission of Human Rights) is a case in point. The meeting between the Chair and President was, in fact, a first of its kind. The Committee and the CHR also exchanged staff members in order to observe each other's working methods. This relationship produced significant results and improved the overall situation regarding the NGO accreditation to the CHR.

Conclusion

The work of the NGO Committee is extremely demanding, arduous, time consuming and requires the utmost attention and self discipline. The diversity of issues discussed during any given Committee session, while examining an application, requires detailed knowledge on almost all matters before the United Nations. The Committee on NGOs is the window of the UN to civil society organisations, and thus, the position of the Chair requires special care. Turkey's contribution to the work of the NGO Committee through its years-long membership and chairmanship of two years, not only significantly strengthened the relationship of the UN with civil society organisations, but at the same time has left an outstanding legacy for the future.