

CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION AND UN WOMEN

[November 2010] Civil society has played an important role in shaping the work of the United Nations, especially since the world conferences of the 1990s (Rio, Vienna, Cairo, and Beijing). It has brought expertise, critical information, personal stories, and diverse voices to assist the UN and governments in addressing global challenges. This systematic participation has enhanced the credibility of the UN *vis a vis* other international institutions and helped it gain the trust of the peoples of the world. The synergy between the UN and civil society in addressing gender equality and women's empowerment has been particularly productive.

One of the principles of the GEAR Campaign has been to ensure that UN Women is both accountable to and informed by civil society, especially women's organizations, through the establishment of mechanisms that include meaningful participation at headquarters and at the regional and country level. Women's NGOs are best placed to provide programming and policy expertise on how the UN and governments can advance women's human rights and achieve gender equality. Bringing in diverse women's voices and building on this experience is critical to UN Women's success and sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the creation of UN Women, there has been recognition of the important role of civil society and the expertise that women's groups and others bring to programs to advance gender equality and women's empowerment, including the calls for the USG to "establish a mechanism for periodic consultations" with civil society (para 39 of the DSG's Modalities paper).

The GEAR Campaign calls for systematic and meaningful participation of civil society- particularly women's groups- in UN Women through:

- (1) Full participation on the Executive Board governing UN Women: UN Women's first board meeting should include representatives of civil society as non-voting members**
- (2) The creation of civil society advisory councils at the country, regional and global levels – these bodies could be made up of thematic experts as well as other stakeholders.**
- (3) Appoint Independent Thematic Experts (ITEs) from civil society to act as advisors in examining specific issues and situations pertaining to women's rights.** The ITE reports would be made available at country, regional, and global levels and submitted to the Executive Board. ITEs should communicate directly with relevant State and civil society actors and identify critical concerns, gaps and policy recommendations related to the issue/situation s/he is investigating. ITE's need to be administratively supported by UN Women and can serve as a link between CSO Thematic Working Groups and the Executive Board.
- (4) The establishment of Thematic Working Groups (TWGs) at the global and regional levels as accountability mechanisms to ensure that CSO expertise/voices shape UN Women's program development, allocation, and implementation.**
- (5) Hold dynamic Public forums or Hearings for UN Women to listen to and exchange with NGOS from around the world during the CSW and at key regional UN events.**

Background Review of UN Processes

There are only a few examples in the UN system where civil society has actually been included as a full participant in the governance structure. One notable exception is the **International Labor Organization (ILO) which is a real pioneer with its tripartite governance by governments, employers and workers.** A more recent innovative example, and one which we use as our model, is the **Programme Coordinating Board of the Joint Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS).** The GEAR Campaign has also reviewed the NGO consultation processes used by other UN agencies, funds and programmes, as well as the experience of the Commission on the Status of Women.

While unfortunately the Resolution establishing UN Women and its Executive Board does not formally give “seats” to civil society, the GEAR Campaign is hopeful that the Under Secretary General of UN Women will establish formal mechanisms whereby women’s rights organizations meaningfully engage in the development of policy and program priorities for the organization. At its first Board Meeting, the USG can include (a) representative(s) from civil society as non-voting members.

Approaches to Civil Society Participation

Most UN funds/programmes are overseen by a Governing Board or Council comprised only of member states. Many have developed other mechanisms for gaining input and advice from civil society but these are advisory only. For example, **UNDP** is governed by an Executive Board that reviews its program and operations, and which is comprised solely of member states without any civil society participation. The UNDP Administrator has set up a civil society **(CSO) Advisory Committee** to get the advice and input of civil society. Established in 2000, the CSO Advisory Committee comprised of leading development NGOs from around the world, meets once a year and reports directly to the Administrator. Its mission is to advise senior management on program and policy directions, putting forth priority issues for discussion and debate. While the Committee provides a useful opportunity for discussion and dialogue, it is not involved in ongoing consultations or decision making. UNDP has begun to set up similar CSO advisory committees in some countries.

The **UN Environment Program (UNEP)** maintains a **civil society unit**, which is organized around nine major groups, a structure established at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The major groups include women, as well as NGOs, youth, labor unions, farmers, local governments, and the private sector among others. UNEP organizes regional and then a **Global Civil Society Forum** prior to its biennial Governing Council (comprised only of member states) meetings. Accredited civil society organizations have access to reports and documents on the agenda of the Governing Council, which tend to be normative policy documents, and are intended to set standards for UNEP’s work. NGOs have an opportunity to give UNEP comments and also to give feedback and make suggestions to member states, but this is in an advisory capacity only.

UN Habitat has also established a practice of involving local authorities and other partners in a dialogue at its meetings of the Governing Council, comprised of member states. Representatives of partner groups, including non-governmental organizations, parliamentarians, the private sector, and labor unions, among others, are given an opportunity to make substantive presentations followed by a discussion with member states.

Opportunities for consultation by the various groups prior to the Governing Council meeting are also provided. This process has enabled partners to contribute ideas and experiences to UN Habitat's program of work.

The UNFPA Global NGO Advisory Panel is relatively new and therefore cannot be measured in its effectiveness, but this panel has been established by the Executive Director of UNFPA, and is served by a secretariat within the External Relations Branch. The purpose is to strengthen partnership between UNFPA and NGOs to advance UNFPA's mandate and to advance the Cairo agenda. The Advisory Panel provides its views on UNFPA's advocacy strategies and recommends programmatic areas for action.

In terms of intergovernmental processes, the **Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)** has a long track record of CSO participation in its annual meetings, which often attract over 1000 civil society participants - the largest participation of any functional commission. Participants include ECOSOC-accredited NGOs and those accredited at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and its subsequent reviews. However, as this is an intergovernmental meeting which focuses on negotiating "Agreed Conclusions" and resolutions, NGOs have no decision making role. NGOs have the right to speak in the meetings at scheduled times and submit written statements; have access to documents and open discussions (but often are excluded from "informals", or negotiating sessions); and can only provide comments and suggestions directly to member states outside meeting rooms.

As the CSW will continue its current role and mandate even as UN Women takes root, it is important that at least this accepted practice for NGO engagement with the intergovernmental negotiations continue. However, it is also important that UN Women create a more **dynamic forum in which to listen to and exchange with NGOs during the CSW**, as there has not been a fairly negative sense of marginalization and frustration among NGOs in recent years and this dynamic needs to be turned around.

Civil Society Participation and UN Women

The GEAR Campaign believes that a formal mechanism that involves organizations committed to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment must be established in the first 90 days of UN Women. This mechanism should include full access to meetings and participation in policy formulation, agenda setting, strategic planning, resource mobilization, budgetary allocation, monitoring and evaluation, setting programmatic priorities and accountability mechanisms to ensure that women's empowerment and gender equality are actively incorporated in the UN's work at all levels.