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Arrangements for intergovernmental meetings

Observer organizations in the Convention process

Recent developments in the United Nations on relations with civil society

Note by the secretariat

Summary

This note highlights key elements of the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in response to the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations. These elements include suggestions for increasing the participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in intergovernmental bodies, increasing the participation of NGOs from developing countries, improving accreditation, and improving the United Nations dialogue with NGOs. The note also describes the corresponding situation in the Convention process.

Following an extensive discussion of these matters at its twentieth session, the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) is invited to consider outstanding questions, including with regard to the admission of observer organizations. Taking into account the recent developments in the United Nations, the SBI may wish to conclude its consideration of these matters and return to them at a future session.

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I. Introduction

A. Mandate

1. The Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI), at its twentieth session, requested the secretariat to inform the SBI at its twenty-second session, of relevant initiatives in the United Nations focused on enhancing the relationship between the United Nations system and civil society, such as the work of the High Level Committee on Programmes and the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations.

B. Scope of the note

2. This note draws on relevant information and suggestions from the report of the Secretary-General¹ in response to the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons.² It summarizes the suggestions of the Secretary-General, highlighting relevant practice from the Convention process, and proposes some possible follow-up action by the SBI.

3. This note should be read in conjunction with document FCCC/SBI/2004/5, prepared for SBI 20. The report of SBI 20 (FCCC/SBI/2004/10, paras. 95–104) contains important information on what has been agreed by the SBI. Submissions from Parties on effective participation in the Convention process have been compiled in document FCCC/SBI/2005/MISC.1. Submissions from observer organizations have been posted on the UNFCCC web site.³

C. Possible action by the Subsidiary Body for Implementation

4. The SBI may wish to conclude its consideration of issues relating to the admission and participation of observer organizations, with a view to returning to the matter at a future session (perhaps, SBI 26 in 2007). In framing any conclusions, or a recommendation to the Conference of the Parties (COP), the SBI may wish to draw on the points raised in chapter IV of this note on possible follow-up.

II. Overview of the report of the Secretary-General in response to the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations

5. The report of the Panel was presented to the General Assembly at its fifty-eighth session for consideration by Member States and for review by the United Nations Secretariat.

6. The Panel concluded that the United Nations needs to expand and deepen its relations with civil society in order to become fully effective and relevant in an increasingly globalized world, where the role of civil society has become more prominent and influential.

7. The Panel proposed reforms based on four main principles which they found to be the basis for guiding the United Nations in its relations with civil society and to meet the current challenges of global governance. It proposed that the United Nations should:

¹ A/59/354.

² A/58/817 and Corr.1.

³ <http://unfccc.int/parties_and_observers/ngo/items/2370.php - submissions>.

- (a) Become a more outward-looking organization;
 - (b) Embrace multi-constituency partnerships;
 - (c) Connect the local with the global;
 - (d) Strengthen democracy in the twenty-first century.
8. Proposals for implementing these reforms were suggested, including greater use of multi-constituency processes, engaging with elected representatives and tackling accreditation and access issues.
9. The “Report of the Secretary-General in response to the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations” was presented to the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly. While acknowledging the pre-eminent role of Member States, the Secretary-General’s report recognized the need to expand and deepen the relationship with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for the overall benefit of multilateral processes and global debates, which may be seen as part of the process of modernization and institutional change that the organization has been undergoing in the past decade. He referred to various proposals, including expanding United Nations consultations with various constituencies and establishing multi-stakeholder partnerships which he agreed would contribute to the United Nations becoming more “outward looking” and to making the deliberations richer, more diverse and grounded in reality. The Secretary-General also pointed out that the collaborative approach, with the creation of new partnerships between governments and NGOs in pursuit of the Millenium Development Goals, will help to “connect the global with the local”.
10. The Secretary-General’s report contains specific suggestions on the implementation of the Panel’s recommendations. These suggestions are summarized below, along with a brief description of the corresponding situation in the Convention process.
11. The Secretary-General’s report is still being considered by the General Assembly.

III. Suggestions of the Secretary-General

A. Increasing the participation of non-governmental organizations in intergovernmental bodies

1. Suggestions

12. On-going activities to strengthen relationships with NGOs are being implemented in the United Nations system, including in the General Assembly, Security Council and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The Secretary-General suggested:
- (a) Expanding and standardizing some mechanisms, such as the format for interactive hearings between representatives of NGOs and Member States;
 - (b) Strengthening the relationship of the Security Council with civil society e.g. conducting some form of assessment, with input from selected NGOs, on completion of each peace mission;
 - (c) Initiating multi-stakeholder task forces on specific issues.
13. The Secretary-General drew particular attention to the success of constituencies and he encouraged NGOs to organize themselves into broad issue-oriented networks to facilitate consultations.
14. The critical role of associations of parliamentarians and local authorities in bringing citizens and local communities into United Nations processes was noted. Recommendations were made to support

meetings of parliamentarians to discuss issues prior to intergovernmental meetings, particularly those relating to global issues such as HIV/AIDs. The Secretary-General encouraged Member States to continue facilitating the participation of local authorities and their associations in intergovernmental meetings and pledged that the United Nations would continue to explore opportunities to strengthen engagement with local authorities.

2. Situation in the Convention process

15. NGOs participate actively in the Convention process. All meetings of the COP and its subsidiary bodies are open to attendance by NGOs, as are contact groups.⁴ Representatives of NGOs are often given the opportunity to make interventions on behalf of groups of NGOs in plenary meetings, including of the COP. They are also invited to address the high-level segment of the COP. Representatives of NGOs are also invited to participate in workshops, albeit in limited numbers. Meetings between NGOs and presiding officers are organized during sessions to exchange views.

16. Following the conclusions of SBI 20, NGOs are now able to submit information and views on issues where such views have been requested from Parties. These submissions are posted on the UNFCCC web site but, in order not to expand the volume of documentation, are not issued as official documents.

17. The SBI considered options for enhanced participation, such as multi-stakeholder dialogues, but took no action.

18. A constituency system based on the self-organization of NGOs into groups and broad networks, as suggested by the Secretary-General, is an established means to facilitate communication with observer organizations and their participation in the Convention process (see FCCC/SBI/2004/5, para. 20).

19. One such constituency encompasses local governments and municipal authority associations. Local governments, municipal authorities and parliamentarians participate in the Convention process as observer organizations.

B. Establishing a trust fund to increase the participation of representatives of non-governmental organizations from developing countries

1. Suggestions

20. The unbalanced participation of NGOs from developing countries in intergovernmental processes was highlighted. The Secretary-General pledged to establish a single trust fund incorporating and expanding existing funds to support travel and accommodation of representatives of accredited NGOs from developing countries to attend intergovernmental meetings.

2. Situation in the Convention process

21. The SBI, at its twentieth session, recognized that NGO participation, although extensive, was not geographically balanced, with fewer NGOs attending from developing countries and countries with economies in transition (EIT countries). The SBI also recognized the importance of more globally representative participation in sessions and workshops and encouraged interested Parties to support attendance by NGOs from developing countries and EIT countries that lack the necessary resources.⁵

⁴ See decision 18/CP.4.

⁵ FCCC/SBI/2004/10, paragraph 102.

C. Improving accreditation

1. Suggestions

22. The Panel made five proposals:

- (a) NGOs be accredited to participate in the work of the General Assembly
- (b) A single accreditation process be established for all United Nations forums
- (c) A committee of the General Assembly be given the responsibility to review all NGO applications for accreditation
- (d) The process of accreditation be streamlined
- (e) The rights and responsibilities pertaining to NGO participation be reviewed and harmonized.

23. The first four proposals are self-explanatory. The fifth proposal recommends a review of the rights and responsibilities of the different categories of ECOSOC-accredited NGOs with the option to develop a uniform regime for the participation of NGOs in global conferences and special sessions of the General Assembly. The Secretary-General suggested that Member States could consider drawing up a code of conduct to reinforce the adherence by NGOs to the aims of the Charter of the United Nations and to act in accordance with the intergovernmental character of the organization.

2. Situation in the Convention process

24. The SBI is to continue its consideration of the admission process under the Convention drawing, in part, on information contained in document FCCC/SBI/2004/5.

25. The secretariat has developed guidelines for the participation of representatives of NGOs at meetings of the UNFCCC bodies.⁶ These guidelines seek to provide information reflecting current practice regarding attendance of observers at sessions and meetings of the UNFCCC. They are in line with those governing NGO participation at sessions of other bodies in the United Nations system. They can be found on the UNFCCC web site⁷.

D. Improving the United Nations Secretariat's dialogue with non-governmental organizations

1. Suggestions

26. The Secretary-General recommended improvements in the United Nations Secretariat's dialogue with NGOs, including through the use of Internet-based techniques to survey public opinion, to raise awareness and to monitor global commitments. Other suggestions included the establishment of a central database of NGOs, maintaining information on best practices relating to NGOs, and improved access to documents.

2. Situation in the Convention process

27. The secretariat includes a small but active team to liaise with observer organizations. The Executive Secretary meets regularly with representatives of NGOs. All official documents are available to NGOs.

⁶ "Guidelines for the participation of representatives of non-governmental organizations at meetings of the bodies of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change".

⁷ <http://unfccc.int/files/parties_and_observers/ngo/application/pdf/coc_guide.pdf>.

28. The secretariat is making efforts to enhance its web-based tools to disseminate information and to provide a focus for NGO-related climate change exchanges. Some progress was possible in the context of the relaunch of the UNFCCC web site in 2004 (see also paragraph 16 above on submissions from NGOs). The secretariat points to its clean development mechanism web pages as a good example of what can be achieved through intensive investment to facilitate effective NGO participation.

E. Enhancing country-level engagement with non-governmental organizations

1. Suggestions

29. The Secretary-General welcomed the emphasis on increased engagement of NGOs with the United Nations system at the country level and recommended two sets of actions, one focused on enhancing the capacity of NGOs at the country level and the other on enhancing the ability of the United Nations resident coordinator system to engage with civil society. The pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals, the preparation of the common country assessments and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework are expected to strengthen relationships between civil society and the United Nations.

2. Situation in the Convention process

30. This recommendation has limited application to the UNFCCC process. However, it may be noted that NGOs are often key actors in national or local climate change strategies. They may also play an important role in organizing and providing inputs to workshops organized by the UNFCCC in host countries. Furthermore, NGOs play a key role in the preparation of national communications in collaboration with government authorities.

F. Exploring the enlargement of the Partnerships Office

1. Suggestions

31. As part of the Secretary-General's second reform package from 2002, a Partnerships Office will be established by merging the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (UNFIP) and the Global Compact Office. This office could be expanded to absorb existing services to NGOs under one umbrella and introduce new units including one specifically for elected representatives. The Secretary-General's initiative fits with the Panel's proposal for the establishment of an office of Constituency Engagement and Partnerships.

2. Situation in the Convention process

32. This initiative may be useful to the Convention process in that it may provide a consolidated source of information on United Nations experiences and practices concerning NGOs.

G. Implementing changes foreseen in the Secretary-General's report

1. Suggestions

33. The Secretary-General noted four areas for improvement in the United Nations system necessary to enhance relations with civil society:

- (a) Maintaining a systematic and sustained dialogue with the NGO community
- (b) Incorporating constituency engagement and partnership concerns into the United Nations human resources processes, including the provision of training opportunities for all staff to improve their skills and to learn to factor NGO considerations into their work

- (c) Funding to support the Partnerships Office and contributions from Parties to related trust funds
- (d) Providing strong institutional leadership.

2. Situation in the Convention process

34. The Convention process is currently addressing the enhancement in the participation of observer organizations. The Secretary-General's recommendations may provide valuable guidelines to the Convention process in this context. It may be noted that many of the activities recommended for improvement may be implemented without requiring substantial additional funding.

IV. Possible follow-up by the Subsidiary Body for Implementation

35. The SBI may wish to take note of the information contained in this document. It may also wish to note that many of the steps recommended by the Secretary-General are already part of UNFCCC practice. The Convention process can take satisfaction from its commitment to promoting observer participation.

36. The SBI may wish to consider a number of points from the Secretary-General's report and decide to move in a similar direction. With regard to the role of parliamentarians and local authorities, the SBI may wish to provide guidance to the secretariat on whether additional steps should be taken to facilitate or strengthen participation by these observers.

37. With regard to the funding of participation, the SBI may wish to request the secretariat to monitor developments in this area in the United Nations to see if opportunities exist for admitted NGOs to access these funds for participation in Convention body meetings. The secretariat could also be invited to investigate the evolving experience in the United Nations system with multi-stakeholder dialogues and the expansion of web-based tools.

38. The SBI is invited to complete the discussion of admission procedures which was initiated at SBI 20. In this context, it may wish to consider the information provided and invite the secretariat to review changes in the accreditation of NGOs in the United Nations system, with a view to incorporating any good practices into the working procedures currently used by the secretariat.

39. The SBI may wish to return to the consideration of these matters perhaps at SBI 26 (May 2007), after further progress has been achieved.
