



## **Part 1**

# **Intergovernmental Negotiations and Decision Making at the United Nations**

## **How it works**





## **Chapter 1**

### **The UN: Who Makes Decisions?**

The primary role of the United Nations is to serve as an international forum for addressing a wide range of global concerns. Its work includes intergovernmental negotiations resulting in collective decisions that both guide the work of the United Nations and shape new international, regional and national policies and actions. Aside from governments, a wide variety of stakeholders, including NGOs, attend and in some cases contribute to UN decision-making processes. They do this through formal and informal, direct and indirect advocacy efforts. Only governments can negotiate, vote and affirm or reject official UN agreements.

Nearly every nation in the world belongs to the United Nations, with membership totaling 191 countries by the end of 2002. States that become Members remain sovereign countries, but they also agree to uphold the UN Charter, the international treaty that established the UN after World War II.

Forty-two other “entities,” such as the non-Member States of Palestine and the Holy See, as well as intergovernmental organizations, including the Commonwealth Secretariat, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International

Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, have a standing invitation to participate as observers in the General Assembly. Most recently, in November 2002, the General Assembly adopted a resolution on cooperation between the United Nations and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), granting the IPU observer status at the GA and the exceptional right to circulate its official documents.

## **Principal Organs**

The UN has six Charter bodies including the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, the Secretariat, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Security Council. Of these, three are the principal decision-making bodies when it comes to the process of government negotiations: the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, and the Security Council. While the decision-making process is essentially the same across the three, each serves a distinct function and is structured and governed differently. The abiding principle in United Nations decision making is, whenever possible, to reach consensus amongst all participating governments. This is, however, not always possible, and in these cases, a range of mechanisms, such as voting and entering reservations, enables decisions to move forward.

## **The General Assembly**

As the UN's main deliberative body, the General Assembly has the right to discuss and make recommendations on any matter that falls under the scope of the Charter. These include peace and security, except when the Security Council is already discussing a situation; political cooperation; international law; human rights; and international collaboration on economic, social, cultural, education and health issues. The General Assembly cannot legally compel governments to act on its decisions, although its recommendations carry the weight of world opinion. How seriously this opinion is taken depends on the perceptions and aims of individual governments, as well as an array of political considerations.

General Assembly decisions also guide much of the year-round work of the UN. They determine policies and programmes for the UN Secretariat; set goals for development activities; approve the UN and peacekeeping budgets; call for world conferences on major issues; admit new Member States; and appoint the Secretary-General upon the recommendation of the Security Council.

**Membership and Voting:** All Member States belong to the General Assembly and each Member State is allowed one vote. Important decisions on particularly critical questions, such as peace and security, require a two-thirds majority. Other decisions are made with a simple majority.

**Annual Sessions:** At the start of each annual General Assembly session, Member States elect a president, 21 vice-presidents and the chairs of the Assembly's six committees. The presidency rotates annually among five regional groups of States: African, Asian, Eastern European, Latin American and Caribbean, and Western European and other States. The General Assembly meets throughout the year, but it convenes its main session at UN Headquarters in New York from early September through mid-December. The main session starts with a two-week general debate attended by Heads of State or Government and ministers. Each year the General Assembly addresses over 150 agenda items, considered either in a plenary session or in one of its six committees.

**The Six Committees:** The large number of items on the General Assembly agenda has required that most be delegated for discussion in six specialized committees. The six committees then meet concurrently to debate specific sets of issues on the agenda, harmonize the points of view of different governments, and draft resolutions for final adoption by the plenary of the GA. The committees include: the First Committee, on disarmament and international security; the Second Committee, on economics and finance; the Third Committee, on social, humanitarian and cultural concerns; the Fourth Committee, on special political and decolonization issues; the Fifth Committee, on administrative and budgetary affairs, and the Sixth Committee, on legal subjects (see box next page).

## **GA Committee Issues**

The six GA committees focus on specific sets of agenda items. Recent examples include:

**First Committee** (Disarmament and International Security): Reduction of military budgets, developments in information and telecommunications in the context of international security, the relationship between disarmament and development, small arms, and review of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

**Second Committee** (Economic and Financial): The international financial system and development, women and development, implementation of Agenda 21, high-level dialogue on strengthening international economic cooperation for development through partnership, international migration, and globalization and interdependence.

**Third Committee** (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural): Follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons, crime prevention, report of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, children's rights, elimination of racism, implementation of human rights instruments, and alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

**Fourth Committee** (Special Political and Decolonization): Effects of atomic radiation, peaceful uses of outer space, comprehensive review of peacekeeping operations, information from Non-Self-Governing Territories, and the implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.

**Fifth Committee** (Administrative and Budgetary): Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the UN, proposed programme budgets, assessments, human resources management, and the financing of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

**Sixth Committee** (Legal): Consideration of the report of the International Law Commission, establishment of the International Criminal Court, measures to eliminate international terrorism, and the scope of legal protection under the Convention on the Safety of UN and Associated Personnel.

**Special and Emergency Sessions:** The General Assembly can call special sessions, which may be held at any time of the year, on specific topics requiring debate as it deems necessary. Special sessions meet at the request of the Security Council, a majority of Member States or one Member State with backing from the majority of Member States. An emergency session of the General Assembly may be called to convene within 24 hours of the emergency to be addressed in the following ways: by any nine members of the Security Council, by the majority of Member States, or by one Member State with majority Member State backing.

### **Special Sessions of the General Assembly**

Up to 2001, the General Assembly has held 26 special sessions on subjects ranging from apartheid to drug abuse to international economic cooperation to HIV/AIDS. Nearly one-third of them have taken place in the last four years, serving mainly as a way for the General Assembly to review the progress of implementing agreements made at world conferences five and ten years after they took place. The +5 and +10 reviews, as they have become known, have followed up on the 1990 World Summit for Children, the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development, the 1994 Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, and the 1996 Conference on Human Settlements.

**NGO Participation:** NGOs do not enjoy official consultative status with the General Assembly, although they are allowed to participate in its activities by invitation. It is common practice to invite NGOs to participate in the special sessions of the General Assembly, especially when the special session is undertaking the review of a major conference (see box above). In practice, NGOs are actively involved in following the work of some of the six committees. They conduct many forms of advocacy, including meeting regularly with delegates and offering position papers.

## **The Economic and Social Council**

The UN Charter established the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) as the principal organ to coordinate the economic and social work of the United Nations and the specialized agencies and bodies, collectively referred to as the UN system (see chart Annex II). ECOSOC's activities include formulating policy recommendations, conducting studies, calling for international conferences and coordinating the UN's specialized agencies.

Under the Charter, it is responsible for promoting higher standards of living, full employment and economic and social progress; identifying solutions to international economic, social and health problems; facilitating international cultural and educational cooperation; and encouraging universal respect for human rights and freedoms. Article 71 of the Charter designates ECOSOC as having the responsibility of granting consultative status to NGOs. As of October 2003, more than 2,350 NGOs have been granted consultative status with ECOSOC. Forty-one NGOs were first granted status in 1948.

**Governance:** Each year ECOSOC members elect a Bureau, comprising a president and four vice-presidents. The presidency rotates among the five regional groups.

**Membership and Voting:** The General Assembly elects 54 Member States to serve three-year terms in ECOSOC. While seeking decisions based on consensus, each member has one vote; voting is by simple majority. Seats are allotted based on geographical representation: 14 for African States, 11 for Asian States, six for Eastern European States, ten for Latin American and Caribbean States, and 13 for Western European and other States. Some Member States also serve on ECOSOC's array of commissions; they are elected by ECOSOC for three- or four-year terms. While every ECOSOC-related meeting is open to all Member States, only those currently serving a term on the Council can vote in Council matters, and, similarly, only those serving a term on one of its commissions (see next page) can vote in that



commission. The year-round work of the Economic and Social Council is carried out in subsidiary and related bodies, which meet at regular intervals and report back to the Council.

**Commissions and Committees:** Much of ECOSOC's work is carried out in its subsidiary bodies (see [www.un.org/esa/coordination/ecosoc/sub\\_bodies.htm](http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/ecosoc/sub_bodies.htm)). ECOSOC oversees ten functional commissions, five regional commissions, and a number of standing committees and expert bodies, some composed of government experts and some of persons serving in their individual capacity.

**Programmes and Funds:** In addition, 11 UN programmes and funds that deal with economic and social affairs report to ECOSOC through their Executive Boards. These organizations were created by the General Assembly, and include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The Council negotiates agreements with the programmes and funds that define their relationship with the UN; coordinates their activities through a process of consultation and recommendations to the General Assembly; and accepts their recommendations for its substantive sessions.

**Specialized Agencies:** ECOSOC also serves as a coordination mechanism for autonomously governed specialized agencies, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which work with the UN and each other. Created separately by member governments, these agencies maintain separate budgets, funding and structures of governance. Under the UN Charter, they are recognized as organizations "brought into agreement" with the United Nations.

**When ECOSOC Meets:** The Council holds one annual four-week substantive session in July, alternating between UN Headquarters in New York and Geneva, and organizational and resumed sessions usually in February, May and October. The substantive session is structured around a series of segments: an operational activities segment, a coordination segment, a humanitarian segment, a general segment, and a high-level segment. During the latter, there is a high-level dialogue at which the heads of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) address the Economic and Social Council members. Since 2001, the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO) has organized annual NGO Forums on the theme of the high-level segment just prior to the high-level segment to allow NGOs to express their recommendations to policy makers.

### **A New Permanent Forum**

In May 2002, the historic first session of a new UN body, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, opened at UN Headquarters in New York. Reporting directly to ECOSOC through a panel of 16 independent experts, the Forum allows indigenous people to present their perspectives directly to UN Member States.

The structure of the Forum marks a new direction in opening UN decision making to non-State participation. Of the 16 representatives, half are nominated by governments and elected by the Council. The other eight are appointed by the President of ECOSOC in consultation with regional groups and indigenous organizations.

The Forum will meet once a year, making recommendations on economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. It will also disseminate information on indigenous issues and promote the coordination of related activities across the UN system.

The committees and commissions meet annually or, in some cases, once every two years. Since 1998, ECOSOC has held a special high-level

meeting each April with finance ministers heading the key committees of the Bretton Woods Institutions—the World Bank and the IMF.

**NGO Participation:** Guided by the UN Charter, ECOSOC is the one UN body that has established rights for NGOs to observe and contribute to its work. The process of approving NGOs for official consultative status with the Council is handled through the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs. Consultative status offers privileges such as access to meetings of ECOSOC and its commissions, as well as requiring the fulfillment of certain obligations, such as filing a report every four years on an organization's contributions to the work of the UN (see section two, chapter one on NGO accreditation).

## **Security Council**

Under the UN Charter, the members of the United Nations have given the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security and have agreed to carry out Security Council decisions, making them mandatory on Member States.

When a situation arises that may pose a threat to international peace, the Security Council usually demands that the parties reach a settlement by peaceful means. It can also propose mediation, develop principles for a settlement, or ask the Secretary-General to investigate the situation. If fighting breaks out, the Council will attempt to broker a ceasefire. This can include the use of peacekeeping forces. The Council can enforce its decisions through economic sanctions and collective military action. In 1990, the Council imposed general trade sanctions on Iraq, but since then the Council has imposed more targeted sanctions, including arms embargoes, travel, banks, restrictions on diplomatic relations, and bans on key commodities like petroleum and diamonds on a range of different governments or belligerents in conflicts such as civil war.

The Security Council also proposes candidates for the office of Secretary-General to the General Assembly, and recommends the

admission of new members. It can recommend that the Assembly expel a Member State that has persistently violated the UN Charter, or suspend members against whom the Council has taken preventative or enforcement action.

**Governance:** The presidency of the Council rotates monthly, following the alphabetical order of its members.

**Membership and Voting:** The Council has 15 members. Five are permanent—China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States. Ten more are elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms. Each Council member has one vote. Decisions on procedural matters require at least nine affirmative votes. Decisions on substantive matters require nine affirmative votes including those of all the permanent members. A negative vote by any one of the permanent members vetoes the decision. If a permanent member does not support a resolution but does not want to block it, it may abstain.

States and non-State actors have put forth a number of proposals concerning potential reform of the size, composition and work of the Security Council. Concerning size and composition, the General Assembly adopted resolution 48/26 in 1993 that established an open-ended working group to consider all aspects of the question of increase in the membership of the Security Council. In 1965 the non-permanent membership of the Security Council was enlarged from six to its present ten. However, any changes in the membership of the Security Council will require an amendment of the Charter, which can only take place with the consent of all the permanent members.

**Committees:** The Security Council regularly establishes committees to monitor situations involving sanctions. In 1999, it also set up a Working Group on General Issues on Sanctions that is developing recommendations on improving the effectiveness of sanctions. In September 2001, following the 11 September attacks on the United States, the Security Council, through resolution 1373, established a Counter-Terrorism Committee that consists of all 15 members of the

Security Council. The resolution called on Member States to prevent and suppress the financing of terrorism, refrain from providing any support to entities or persons involved in terrorist acts, and deny safe haven to those who finance, plan, support and commit such acts.

**When the Security Council Meets:** The Council is in session throughout the year. A representative of each member is expected to be present at all times at UN Headquarters.

**NGO Participation:** There is currently no formal mechanism for NGO participation in the Security Council's discussions. To contribute information, expertise and knowledge, NGO representatives meet informally with Member States who are on the Security Council. In recent years, however, the Security Council has held a number of informal meetings or briefings to solicit NGO contributions, including under the Arria Formula rules, which allow non-governmental voices to give informal testimony in relation to specific crises or issues related to the Council's work. Recent examples have included sessions on small arms, protection of civilians in armed conflict, children and war, the humanitarian situation in Angola, and the issue of women, peace and security.

### **Special Events: A Focus on an Issue**

Aside from the ongoing discussions held in the main UN organs, Member States may also decide to hold special intergovernmental events focusing on particularly timely or urgent issues. These include world conferences, summits and special sessions of the General Assembly.

**Conferences and Summits:** UN world conferences and summits are held when Member States collectively agree that an issue needs widespread political and public attention—women, children, poverty, the environment and financing for development are some prominent examples from the last decade. These gatherings draw high-level political participation, including from Heads of State and

Government (summits are designed specifically for this level); they mobilize governments, international institutions, NGOs and civil society to push for action on urgent global problems; and they attract the interest of millions around the world through extensive media coverage.

Specifically, they provide a forum for Member States to introduce emerging issues for debate, and establish internationally agreed standards and actions that can steer international, regional and national policies. They start a process where governments make commitments to actions, including later reporting back to the UN on progress that they have made. They also provide an opportunity for NGOs and civil society to engage with governments and UN officials, enliven policy debate, and raise issues that might otherwise be ignored. Many of these events in recent years have also included parallel NGO forums.

These forums can provide a structured meeting place for persons and groups interested in the subject matter of the government conference. While there is usually no formal interchange between the NGO forum and the delegations to the international conference, the two events can and do interact with and influence each other. Over 20,000 participants took part in the Global People's Forum held parallel to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg (South Africa) in August-September 2002.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Negotiations: How Are Decisions Made?**

At the start of any decision-making process, governments propose, individually or collectively, that a particular issue be raised in the appropriate forum, such as the General Assembly, ECOSOC or through a world conference. The participating governments discuss the issue and negotiate the written language of a draft agreement, the decision being adopted in one of a variety of formats. The vast majority of United Nations decisions appear as resolutions, which are relatively short texts and documents that include preambular background paragraphs followed by a list of operative paragraphs, or agreements on future actions. Other outcomes include declarations, which are fairly concise statements conveying a high level of political concern; programmes of action, which call upon governments to take a series of actions voluntarily; and complex and legally binding conventions and treaties, which may require countries to make changes in their own domestic laws. Governments also make decisions on organizational issues, which are meant to guide the structure and administration of a negotiating process. These can include the election of officers for a meeting, the adoption of the agenda and the determination of who may attend negotiations in addition to Member States.

## The Lifecycle of a Decision

Whatever format a decision takes, it starts as a draft text that is prepared by one of several sources, generally based on advance inputs from governments. The initial draft can be prepared by the Secretariat, the chair of the negotiations, a group of delegations such as the European Union (EU) or the Group of 77 developing countries and China (G-77/China), an individual delegate or a facilitator specifically appointed for the task. In the case of resolutions, one or more “sponsor” governments may draft the text, which the Secretariat then registers and distributes as an official document. Those responsible for drafting will work in close consultation with delegates before the formally scheduled negotiations begin.

The draft text then becomes the focus of discussion and reaction among governments. Delegates go through the text from start to finish, agree on minor adjustments, identify those passages that they cannot easily accept and offer amendments that could be deletions or additions. The Secretariat may produce a compilation of all versions proposed. As the areas of agreement and disagreement become clear, a draft text is prepared denoting areas of disagreement usually in square brackets. Secretariat staff normally monitor and record changes as they occur. A succession of additional sessions are held, under the authority of the chair or a facilitator, where delegates narrow down their differences, eliminating the brackets when a portion of language is agreed. Some check back and forth with officials in their mission or capital, seeking guidance on how far they may compromise. Sometimes delegates agree to language *ad referendum*, which means they must check with their capital or ministry for final approval.

As negotiations near their conclusion, there may be some “give-and-take” as delegates consider the balance of elements in the “package,” and whether they can let go of some pieces in order to retain others. When all the participating governments finally reach agreement on the exact wording of all portions of the text, they adopt it officially. If all Member States are willing to accept the agreement, then it is adopted by consensus. In some cases, however, delegates cannot reach



agreement and the chair may finally call for Member States to vote either for or against the proposal or to abstain. On occasion, a Member State may call for a roll-call vote to place on the record the vote of individual Member States. During a roll-call vote, the chairperson will call each country's name, and possible responses are: Yes, No, or Abstain.

If a Member State wishes to place their views on record, they may offer an explanation of their vote either before or after the vote itself. Another way for Member States to express disagreement with the text or part of a text is by entering a reservation after adoption. This indicates that a Member State does not agree to comply with one or more of the document's provisions. Reservations are intended to be used only temporarily, indicating that States agree with the decision in principle even if they are currently unable to realize it. Another way for Member States to express disagreement with the text is to issue an "interpretive statement" to define their position and what the language in question means or does not mean to them.

### **Evolution of an Agreement**

- n Election of officers for the meeting; agreement on organizational issues.
- n Preparation and consideration of initial draft outcome text.
- n Integration of agreed changes and proposals by the Secretariat, the chair or a facilitator. Proposals for deletions of existing text or additions of new text are marked with square brackets (or equivalent) and a revised text is distributed.
- n Additional rounds of negotiations and changes. Square brackets are removed from text as delegates reach agreement.
- n The final text, adopted by consensus.
- n Notification of any reservations by individual governments.
- n For legally binding instruments: ratification.

In the case of legally binding treaties, these have to be signed and then ratified by each signatory or participating Member State. This allows governments time to seek domestic approval of the agreement,

generally through parliamentary or other legislative bodies, since existing domestic law may have to be changed, or new laws created.

## **Types of Meetings for Negotiations**

Negotiating processes at the UN usually take place in two sessions a day, in the morning and the afternoon. If the debate becomes protracted, extra evening sessions may be scheduled. It is not uncommon for the final sessions to be extended, possibly throughout the night, to complete the negotiations.

Sessions take place in two formats: open or closed. Open or formal sessions, which are part of the official record, can be attended by everyone with proper accreditation, including NGOs and the media. These usually include plenary sessions, where all delegates participate. Plenary sessions normally open a major intergovernmental meeting and are where Member States make their individual policy statements. They are also the forums where formal decisions are made, including the final adoption of an agreed text, by consensus or a vote, or the noting of reservations.

### *The Daily Journal*

All formal meetings at the United Nations are listed each day in *The Daily Journal*, a publication that is available throughout UN buildings in New York: at entrances, in press rooms, in NGO centres and at document windows. It can also be found online ([www.un.org/Docs/journal/En/lateste.pdf](http://www.un.org/Docs/journal/En/lateste.pdf)).

*The Journal*, as it is known, lists all formal meetings and working groups meeting during the day. It notes whether the meeting is open or closed to the media, and contains a list of the relevant UN documents for the meeting, as well as newly issued UN documents.

In Geneva, the UN News from Geneva website ([www.unog.ch/unog01/files/002\\_media/media.asp](http://www.unog.ch/unog01/files/002_media/media.asp)) provides a list of upcoming meetings, press conferences and briefings, as well as press releases.

When governments reach the point in a negotiating process where they need to hammer out agreement on particularly contentious topics, they may break into informal closed sessions, often called working groups. These can be closed to everyone except delegates and Secretariat staff, although NGOs may also be allowed to attend as observers, depending to some extent on past practice in a given process and the discretion of the Chairperson. The deliberations in informal sessions are not included in the official record. Delegates maintain they will make more progress if they can speak and debate freely among themselves and deal with sensitive issues without the constraints of the public spotlight. A negotiating process that is working on a long document may ask delegations to break into a number of informal working groups, with each taking a specific issue or section of the text. In theory only two working groups can meet at any given time, in order to accommodate smaller delegations.

In some cases, governments form contact groups, or hold informal informals, which are strictly off-limits to anyone except a core group of delegates. These meet outside the main negotiation rooms, generally at a time and place announced in the working group, and bring together only those governments with a strong interest in a particular issue that has caused disagreement. Contact groups seek to bring widely conflicting positions closer together, before presenting the results of the discussions to the meeting at large. They also save time by allowing concerned delegates to have a detailed discussion while the rest of the working group continues its deliberations.

Towards the end of complicated negotiations, when the time pressure is great, delegates may huddle, either in or across the negotiating groups, on the negotiating floor itself to hammer out last minute details. Truly sticky issues often end up being tackled by measures such as the use of a facilitator, an extended bureau, or “friends of the Chair.” The Chair, working with a handful of governments on a particularly contentious subject, may have to use all his or her power of persuasion or creative suggestions on new language in order to bring about consensus.

## **The Bureau**

Most negotiating processes are overseen by a Bureau. Appointed at the outset by the consensus of Member States, it always consists of at least five members from the five regions, and includes a Chair, three Vice-Chairs and a Rapporteur. In some situations, an extended Bureau is deemed necessary. This might include a representative from the host country (for a meeting outside the usual UN venues), the Chair of the Group of 77 developing countries and China (G-77/China), a coordinator for the least developed countries (LDCs), and other representatives who are considered particularly important to the process.

Member States used to consider Bureau membership mainly as a position bolstering their prestige. However, in the last decade there has been a shift in favour of more active Bureaus, and there is a growing sense that Bureau members contribute to the success or failure of a process. While Bureaus used to coalesce just for the formal meeting sessions, some now consult regularly in advance of meetings. They may have close contact with Secretariats, and conduct informal briefings and consultations with Member States to prepare for the formal meetings and negotiations.

## **The Secretariat**

The various institutional arms of the UN support all intergovernmental negotiations and decisions. Based in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, the UN Secretariat manages the administration of the UN as a whole, making the arrangements necessary to allow Member States to meet and do their work. The UN also has five regional economic commissions: the Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN ECLAC), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP), and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA).

The Secretariat provides logistical services, coordinates the dissemination of public information, prepares analyses and statistics, and guides delegates through the rules of procedures and practices that govern intergovernmental negotiations. In some cases, the Secretariat convenes expert groups and prepares questionnaires for Member States to collect national data. Issue experts may also draft initial documents for negotiations.

Headed by the Secretary-General, the Secretariat is responsible for ensuring the UN carries out decisions adopted by the General Assembly, the Security Council, ECOSOC and other UN bodies. The Secretary-General carries out two roles: as the chief administrative officer and as the world's senior diplomat who maintains close contact with government delegates and frequently speaks in debates. As an institutional mechanism, the Secretariat makes a direct input into many processes by issuing substantive reports, which are prepared by the appropriate department of the Secretariat. Each year the Secretary-General issues a report on the work of the UN that appraises its activities and outlines future priorities.

For major world conferences or other special events, a separate conference Secretariat may be established and headed by a conference Secretary-General.

A range of UN funds and agencies also contribute to and are shaped by the United Nation's political processes. They frequently participate in intergovernmental debates by speaking to delegates and providing reports and other forms of background information. Negotiated decisions may call upon these organizations to carry out specific activities or assist in reaching certain internationally agreed goals.

## **How New Negotiating Processes Begin**

The impetus for holding intergovernmental talks outside the routinely scheduled discussions of the main UN forums—such as a conference,

summit or special session—always begins with the political initiative of one or more Member States. When political momentum begins to build, sponsoring governments craft a proposed resolution calling for the meeting; this is then debated, modified and adopted in the General Assembly or ECOSOC. The resolution not only requests that the conference be held, but it also spells out the goals, agenda and the preparatory process. It may denote specific details, such as the number of people who will serve on the meeting's Bureau, when the first global preparatory meeting will be held, and the procedures for the participation of NGOs.

Once the resolution is agreed, a conference Secretariat is set up and begins preparing documents and circulating them to Member States. National governments may establish national preparatory committees to draw up their own positions and policies, and to prepare reports and collect data on issues related to achievements, obstacles, best practices and so on.

### **Anatomy of a Conference**

- n Informal Proposals
- n Debate Among Governments
- n Passing of a Resolution
- n National and Regional Preparations
- n PrepComs Begin Negotiating an Outcome Document
- n The Conference is held, often consensus has been reached on most issues prior to the event and negotiations conclude
- n Member States Officially Adopt the Document

Meetings held in preparation for conferences, special sessions and other time-bound processes follow a specific format. Once governments agree to convene in one of these forums, they also initiate the process to prepare for it, often in the form of a Preparatory Committee (PrepCom).

In a series of advance sessions, PrepComs handle the bulk of the negotiating required to develop the long and often complex agreements issued by conferences and special sessions. If the work is not completed by the time of the conference or meeting itself, an Ad Hoc Committee of the Whole (COW) is set up to finish it. It may convene informal working group sessions to continue negotiations, while the conference plenary meets concurrently to hear general debate and make formal decisions. In some cases, the Ad Hoc COW meets formally and separately from the plenary in order to accommodate long lists of speakers spilling over from the general debate.

A series of regional intergovernmental meetings may also begin—on social and economic issues—and are generally coordinated by the ECOSOC regional economic commissions. They allow Member States to bring their national priorities to a regional forum; to discuss and negotiate common regional objectives; and to make recommendations to the global preparatory meetings.

At the international level, a PrepCom is formed, as is a Bureau for the PrepCom. Its major task is to initiate negotiations on a final outcome document: the majority of recommendations and outcomes are determined during the preparatory process. The PrepCom meets up to four times between the passage of the resolution calling for the meeting and the actual event. These sessions may run from one to four weeks, and are mainly held at UN facilities in New York, Geneva, Vienna or Nairobi.

The first substantive meeting of the PrepCom normally determines the basic elements and form of the final document. In later meetings, the PrepCom begins the concentrated work of negotiating the fine print, going through the outcome document line by line. Generally, the document is more than half finished by the time of the event, with only the most contentious issues outstanding. Reaching consensus on these subjects often requires the presence of the high-level government officials who attend the meeting, as well as the pressure of agreeing on the document before the meeting closes.







## **Chapter 3**

### **The Negotiators: Building “Bloc” of Power**

The negotiating system at the UN functions in large part through negotiating blocs, or groups of countries speaking with a common voice. These alliances may be fluid—but some are long institutionalized. Allegiances and antagonisms may shift depending on how the political winds outside the UN are blowing, yet some general rules apply: industrialized, mainly western, countries tend to share similar points of view on subjects such as support for human rights, a free market economy and issues of international development co-operation. Developing countries come together over some common economic issues such as governance of the global economy and access to markets, while struggling to reconcile different points of view in areas such as environmental protection, and on social and cultural issues such as women’s rights.

While Member States are always entitled to speak independently, negotiating blocs allow nations to build on a position of strength in numbers. In some cases, they can help negotiations move forward, because consensus has already been reached among at least the members of the group. However, members also may have their own widely divergent positions. Bridging these can take time and result in general positions of little interest to some of the group members.

Some blocs appear in every set of negotiations. The European Union always speaks with one voice, because it is a legally established formal entity. The Group of 77 and China strive to present the perspectives of the developing world as a whole, although it does not consistently maintain a unified front. Other blocs form just for the duration of a particular set of talks, or emerge over the years. Some permanent groupings are active in UN deliberations only on certain issues. A number of Member States operate independently of negotiating blocs, but may also associate with them on occasion. Below are some of the groups that have been active recently:

- n **The European Union (EU):** EU members, under the terms of their Treaties, must negotiate together. The EU currently comprises Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Increasingly, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe associated with the European Union—Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and the associated countries—Cyprus, Malta and Turkey—align themselves with statements of the EU. Sometimes Norway and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) align themselves with the position of the European Union.
- n **The Group of 77 and China (G-77/China):** A longstanding bloc established in 1967, the G-77/China has become the voice of most developing countries, representing the positions of over 133 members, particularly on economic and development issues.
- n **Japan, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (JUSCANZ):** A grouping of the non-EU industrialized countries listed together with Iceland, Mexico and the Republic of Korea.
- n **Non-Aligned Movement (NAM):** Created in 1961 at the height of East-West friction to provide an independent forum for its mainly developing country members, NAM has 114 members from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. In the UN it

focuses on political issues, while the G-77/China emphasizes development.

- n **The Rio Group:** A permanent mechanism for political consultation and consensus of the countries from Latin and Central America and some Caribbean countries. It sometimes develops positions and negotiates as a group at the UN on issues of human rights, governance and trade to be able to take different stances than those of the G-77/China.
- n **Southern African Countries:** These countries, all members of the G-77/China, have not created a formal negotiating group, but they occasionally work and speak together on issues when there is not a G-77/China position, *e.g.*, social issues, women’s rights.
- n **The Caribbean Community (CARICOM):** Includes all English-speaking countries of the region—Antigua & Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and Haiti, and Trinidad & Tobago.
- n **The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS):** AOSIS is an informal alliance of small island and low-lying coastal developing countries formed in 1990 to address member interests in negotiations on climate change and related issues. AOSIS has a membership of 43 States and observers, drawn from all oceans and regions of the world.
- n **Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC):** The OIC is an intergovernmental organization set up in 1969 with 56 members that include Islamic States as well as countries with a significant Islamic community. It is the only grouping in the UN that recognizes the connection between religion and politics and is active on social and cultural issues and Palestine.
- n **Western European and Other Groups (WEOG):** A geo-political grouping of 27 States that share a Western-Democratic common denominator.
- n **Regional groups:** UN Member States participate in regional groups

for the purposes of identifying regional candidates for the UN intergovernmental bodies. The African and Latin American groups also discuss substantive positions.

In addition to negotiating independently or as part of a group, delegates also make alliances that never appear in the public view, as many negotiations take place long before delegates reach the conference room floor. Diplomats engage in the UN's corridors, meet over coffee or cocktails, gather in the delegates' lounge, and negotiate over the phones at their missions. Those who have served for a long period in any of the main UN locations, such as New York, have long histories together, and know exactly how far they can push their issues and who they can expect to offer support or opposition.

### **Tactics and Trade-Offs**

Diplomats, both individually and in negotiating blocs, use many strategies to advance their positions. Here are some common plays:

- n **Never Reveal All Your Positions:** This is standard diplomatic practice. Compromises at the United Nations fit together like a puzzle: delegates offer the pieces one at a time, keeping in mind the need to achieve a handful of their most desired objectives.
- n **Offer Hard-line Language:** All government proposals must be considered, so some delegates will offer what they know is an unacceptable position in order to bring other countries closer to what they want, at which point they will trade it in for a compromise.
- n **Hold Off Until the End:** The most difficult passages are always finished last. At this point, everyone will have a sense of the compromises everyone else has made, and will be able to assess how much room there is to manoeuvre on the stickiest points.

- Leave the Room: Delegates who may not want to speak or vote for the record may simply decide to go out for a break.

## **Who Sits on Delegations?**

Most Member States maintain permanent missions to the United Nations in New York (and in some cases to the United Nations in Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna as well). These missions are staffed year round with diplomats who attend to routine and ongoing processes and debates. Since the UN is viewed by most governments as the key international arena to express their foreign policy goals, diplomats often come from the Foreign Ministry.

For special conferences or other events, diplomats and government officials may come in from capitals. These delegations usually comprise one or two top government officials, up to the Head of State or Government; senior ministry representatives; technical experts; representatives from the mission or embassy where the meeting is being held; and sometimes NGOs and members of the private sector, although this is not obligatory.

High-level officials and political figures, such as Heads of State, generally do not participate directly in negotiations. They are more likely to be found in closed bilateral or small high-level meetings or delivering plenary speeches that outline their government's position on an issue.





## **Chapter 4**

### **Tracking Negotiations and Decisions Through Documents**

Different kinds of documents form the substance and guide every aspect of the UN decision-making process. Each round of negotiation includes the following general categories of documents: those related to organizational issues; government and other statements; information on the issue at hand, such as reports from the Secretary-General; and a draft text or texts that delegates use for negotiations. Many documents carry an official number and appear in the six official languages of the United Nations: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish.

#### **Organizational Issues**

**The agenda:** The agenda is normally proposed and passed in the first session of a meeting. It outlines the schedule for the negotiations and what will be discussed.

**The report of the meeting:** The report is generally adopted at the last session. It includes a detailed record of who attended, how many sessions were held, what decisions were made on organizational issues and what the final outcome was.

## **Negotiations**

The text of a negotiated agreement can travel through many different versions and revisions in the course of a negotiating process. In general, the debate relies most heavily on two kinds of documents: those presented as the foundation for discussion towards an agreement, which are regularly revised and updated, and the various proposals, additions and corrections submitted during the course of the meeting.

**The draft outcome text:** The draft outcome text is the basis on which governments negotiate. The process of writing this document, often drafted by the Secretariat, generally involves the solicitation of views from participating governments and UN agencies concerned with the subject being discussed. In some cases, NGOs and other stakeholders may have been invited to contribute as well.

**Chair's text:** At times, in order to bridge differences on some of the more difficult issues or final compromise text, the chair of the meeting will draft a text, lending political authority to persuade delegates to accept the text without much revision and move forward.

**Facilitator's text:** If a process has appointed a facilitator to assist the negotiations, he or she listens to input from governments and then drafts a new or revised text. This document may be accepted by delegations as expressing their areas of agreement or may become the basis for continuing line-by-line negotiations.

**Government proposals:** Once a text enters negotiations, individual governments or negotiating blocs offer their proposed amendments. Much of this process takes place orally, with governments suggesting changes in their interventions from the floor. More complicated passages, or passages negotiated separately by a small group of governments, are often submitted in written form.

**Compilation text:** Periodically during the negotiations, the Secretariat will issue a compilation text that includes all agreed changes or



additional proposals. This document then becomes the basis for continued discussions.

**Working papers:** Prepared by Member States, the Secretariat or chair or president of an intergovernmental body, working papers provide background and substantive information pertinent to the issue at hand.

**Conference room papers:** Those in the room where negotiations are taking place have access to conference room papers, which can include government proposals for changes to the text under deliberation, or additional reports or information on the subject at hand.

**Non-papers:** These are prepared primarily by government representatives to try to unblock or explain positions on the text under consideration. They often do not bear a document number, and are not considered part of the official record of the meeting.

**Modifications:** These include: addendums; alterations of a portion of adopted text by a competent authority; corrigendums, which may not apply to all language versions; summarized versions; and the re-issuance of a document for technical reasons.

## **For Information**

**Statements from governments, international organizations and NGOs:** Negotiations generally open in formal sessions where delegates as well as speakers from international organizations and accredited NGOs outline their positions on the issues under discussion. Printed copies of these speeches are often available in the conference room. Increasingly the Internet is being used as a vehicle for distribution.

**Reports from the Secretary-General:** The Secretary-General provides detailed reports on subjects related to the negotiations, including background material, a sense of global perspective and

information on impact on the UN system. These reports may incorporate information from governments on situations within individual countries.

**Technical reports:** These elucidate additional details on a topic under consideration.

**Letters from governments:** Used as a way to bring official texts negotiated by organizations outside the UN to the UN's attention.

**Reports of commissions, committees, ad hoc bodies and other previous meetings:** They include the previous agenda, lists of participants, and a record of what was discussed and agreed.

**Information series:** General information, such as lists of participants.

**Press releases:** The Department of Public Information issues press releases on the same day as most open meetings. It also compiles Daily Highlights, summaries of daily UN-related events around the world ([www.hri.org/news/world/undh](http://www.hri.org/news/world/undh)).

## **Document Symbols**

Documents officially issued by the Secretariat are tracked and identified by type through symbols combining strings of letters and numbers. Several components, separated by vertical slashes, make up each symbol, which remains the same across all language versions of a document.

Generally, the first component of a symbol reflects the main body issuing or accepting the document.

These include:

- A/- for the General Assembly
- S/- for the Security Council
- E/- for ECOSOC
- ST/- for the Secretariat

However, some subsidiary organs carry their own special symbol:

- C RC/C/- for the Committee on the Rights of the Child
- DP/- for the UN Development Programme
- TD/- for the UN Conference on Trade and Development
- UNEP/- for the UN Environment Programme
- C AT/C/- for the Committee Against Torture
- CEDAW/C/- for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
- CERD/C/- for the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
- CCPR/C/- for the Human Rights Committee

Secondary and tertiary components indicate subsidiary bodies:

- -/AC. .../- for ad hoc committee
- -/C. .../- for standing, permanent or main committee
- -/CN. .../- for commission
- -/CONF. .../- for conference
- -/GC. .../- for governing council
- -/PC. .../- for preparatory committee
- -/SC. .../- for subcommittee
- -/Sub. .../- for subcommission
- -/WG. .../- for working group

For the General Assembly, ECOSOC and the Security Council, the second component may indicate the session or year of the meeting that produced the document. ECOSOC commissions are given a number: the Commission on Human Rights, for example, is designated CN.4.

Additional components reflect the nature of the document:

- -/INF/- for information series
- -/L. ... for limited distribution, generally of draft documents
- -/NGO/- for statements by NGOs
- -/PET/- for petitions
- -/PRST/- for statements by the president of the Security Council
- -/PV. ... for verbatim records of meetings
- -/R. ... for restricted distribution

- -/RES/ for resolutions
- -/SR. ... for summary records of meetings
- -/WP. ... for working papers

The final component may denote simply the sequence number of a document in a session or process, or describe modifications to the original text, for instance:

- -/Add. ... for an addendum
- -/Amend. ... for an alteration
- -/Corr. ... for a corrigendum
- -/Rev. ... for a revision
- -/Summary for a summarized version
- -/\_\* for re-issuance for technical reasons

Underneath each symbol is a date that refers to the date of issuance of the document from the substantive UN department and its registration with the documents control office. On the lower left-hand corner of the document is the date upon which editing, translating and printing were completed; often, there is a substantial gap between issuance and completion. For GA resolutions, the date of adoption appears at the end of the text.

## **How to Find Documents**

Many UN documents can now be found on the Internet—both texts that will be discussed and those that have already been agreed (see *United Nations Documentation Research Guide* online at [www.un.org/depts/dhl/resguide](http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/resguide)). General Assembly resolutions, for example, are listed by session under the GA's section of the UN website. Documents for special conferences or processes may appear on websites specifically organized for the event.

Once a meeting starts, counters for distributing UN documents are usually located in the rooms where negotiations take place, but these are often restricted to delegates or UN staff. If a room has been allocated for NGO use, the relevant documents may be delivered directly there.

**Examples of Symbols**

- n A/56/1 indicates the first document considered by the General Assembly in its 56th session.
- n E/CN.4/1999/SR.60 is the summary record of the 60th meeting of the 54th session of the Commission on Human Rights.
- n UNEP/GC.18/29/Corr.1 comes from the 18th session of the UNEP Governing Council, document number 29, corrigendum number one.
- n A/C.2/57/L.6 is a document of limited distribution, often a draft resolution, from the 2nd Committee of the General Assembly in its 57th session.

Documents that have already been printed help provide background information and distil a general sense of the issues under consideration. But as delegates negotiate, draft texts that appeared on Monday morning may be substantially different by Monday afternoon. Governments regularly submit new proposals. These are then photocopied by the Secretariat and distributed to other delegates. Sometimes, extra copies are placed on document tables at the back of the room, which are available for those in attendance at the meeting.

A recent trend has been to project the text of negotiations onto a large screen that is operated by Secretariat staff working on a computer. Governments read out their proposals, which are typed in and appear on the screen, usually in a different colour or text style.





## **Chapter 5**

### **Outcomes: The Nature of UN Decisions**

The variety of forums in which United Nations negotiations take place may appear to be independently organized, with different diplomats participating and different parts of the United Nations coordinating the logistics of the work. But since UN debates unfurl within a given political climate and are influenced by closely interrelated issues, different decision-making processes and their outcomes are closely linked. An agreement struck in one forum may rest upon a compromise reached in another. When consensus proves elusive, delegates may refer back to the language of the last consensus on an issue.

Not all United Nations decisions carry the same weight, however. Their importance varies depending on what kind of document they appear in, and which body has issued them. A legally binding treaty has to be taken more seriously than a plan of action articulating a set of political commitments. A General Assembly resolution carries more weight than one from an ECOSOC commission.

The type of instrument and forum used to convey a decision is usually determined by an issue's gravity and political implications.

Some common examples of UN decisions include:

**Agreements:** In its broadest sense, agreements refer to all consensus decisions made by Member States, whether or not they are legally binding. Under a more narrow definition, an agreement is less formal than a treaty and deals with a more limited range of issues. It is used particularly for technical or administrative instruments that may be signed by government representatives, but are not subject to ratification, the international act whereby a State indicates its consent to be bound by a treaty. Agreements in this sense often deal with economic, cultural, scientific and technical cooperation issues, as well as some financial matters. Most international instruments are now designated as agreements.

**Resolutions:** This is the formal decision used by UN organs, such as the General Assembly, to express an agreement or conclusion. Resolutions include a preamble, which sets forth the basis on which action should be taken, and a series of operative paragraphs that spell out actions or directives.

**Decisions:** This denotes formal agreement that is not a resolution and that usually deals with organizational matters such as elections, appointments or the place of meetings.

**Treaties:** A treaty refers generically to all instruments that are legally binding under international law. Several criteria apply: the contracting parties must intend to create legal rights and duties; the instrument must be concluded by States or international organizations with treaty-making power; the treaty must be governed by international law; and it must be in writing. Usually, treaties are reserved for matters that require more solemn or politically important agreements. They normally involve ratification by each government in order to go into effect.

**Conventions:** The generic use of the term “convention” is synonymous with the generic use of the term “treaty”—it can cover all legally binding international agreements. It may also refer to a group



of laws apart from international customary rules and general principles of international law. As a specific term, convention is now mainly used for formal multilateral treaties with a broad number of parties, such as the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity. Conventions can also be adopted by an organ of an international organization, such as the General Assembly's 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**Protocols:** A protocol focuses on specific issues or areas within a treaty or convention. It includes several different instruments. A protocol of signature is subsidiary to a treaty and drawn up by the same parties. It deals with ancillary matters such as the interpretation of particular clauses and is ratified along with the treaty. An optional protocol establishes additional rights and obligations to a treaty; it is subject to independent ratification. This kind of protocol allows some treaty parties to reach beyond the general agreement of all treaty signatories. A prominent example would be the 1999 Optional Protocol to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Its provisions include allowing individuals or groups of women to formally petition about human rights violations directly to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

A protocol based on a framework treaty specifies substantive obligations in order to implement a previous convention. They have been used particularly in international environmental law, for instance with the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. It was followed by the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which, among other things, sets forth legally binding emissions targets for gases such as carbon dioxide. A protocol to amend contains provisions that amend one or more former treaties. A protocol as a supplementary treaty contains supplementary provisions to a previous treaty.

**Charters:** This is the most solemn and formal instrument of international agreement, generally reserved for treaties that create new international organizations, such as the 1945 Charter of the United Nations.

**Declarations:** Declarations lie somewhere between resolutions and conventions and some can also carry the weight of customary law, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They convey a high level of aspiration and political commitment, usually adopted at the Head of State or Government level. A recent example would be the 2000 Millennium Declaration, a compilation of priority actions adopted by a record 189 Heads of State or Government at the Millennium General Assembly of the United Nations in 2000. An interpretative declaration may be annexed to a treaty to explain its provisions.

**Programmes or Platforms for Action:** These are blueprints for a series of actions that governments have agreed should be taken on a specific set of issues at the national, regional and international levels. As statements primarily of political will and commitment, they are not legally binding. Most world conferences have agreed on programmes or platforms for action.

**Agreed Conclusions:** In some cases, governments decide to conclude a meeting with a negotiated outcome but without commitments for action by governments. These “agreed conclusions” can set the basis for policy development.

**Chair’s Summary:** A chair’s summary expresses the sense and direction of a meeting without including commitments for action by governments. It enables views expressed or the deliberations of a special segment to be included in the official record of a meeting.

**Sanctions:** The Security Council may impose sanctions on one or more Member States in situations where it decides that these are the most effective ways to maintain international peace and security. Mandatory sanctions generally follow the failure of diplomatic efforts. Sanctions may encompass comprehensive economic and trade measures or specifically target areas such as arms purchases, travel or diplomatic exchanges.

**Memorandum of Understanding:** This is a less formal agreement that often sets out operational arrangements under an international

framework agreement. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) typically does not require ratification, and can be entered into either by States or international organizations. The United Nations, for example, establishes an MoU with Member States to organize peacekeeping operations or arrange UN conferences.





## **Part 2**

# **Intergovernmental Negotiations and Decision Making at the United Nations**

## **A Guide to NGO Participation**





## **A Guide to NGO Participation**

### **by Gretchen Sidhu\***

NGOs have been active in the United Nations since its founders committed themselves to non-governmental participation. Article 71 of the UN Charter reads: “The Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for the consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence. Such arrangements may be made with international organizations and, where appropriate, with national organizations after consultation with the Member of the United Nations concerned.”

This article and the arrangements established by ECOSOC form the basis for NGO engagement with governments at the UN and establish guidelines for the UN Secretariat when dealing with NGOs. These procedures and arrangements also govern or guide UN agencies and programmes in their relations with NGOs. Formal ongoing relationships of NGOs with the UN are based on two main activities: consultative status and information outreach. The first type is facilitated by the NGO Section of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, which handles the process by which NGOs gain

\* Gretchen Sidhu has worked as a journalist and NGO activist covering the United Nations and an array of intergovernmental negotiations since 1994. She currently writes and edits publications on development issues for international institutions including the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Children’s Fund, and the Inter-American Development Bank.

consultative status with ECOSOC through its Committee on NGOs. The second relationship is established through the NGO Section of the Department of Public Information (DPI). The Department associates organizations working on public outreach.

The UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) occupies a unique place and role in relations between the UN system and NGOs. As an interagency programme, NGLS is mandated to support the organizations of the UN in developing their relations with NGOs and wider civil society and also to support the constructive engagement of NGOs and CSOs in the work and governance of the UN system. NGLS collaborates with national and regional NGOs from developing and industrialized countries, and with international NGO networks and NGOs in consultative relationship with the UN through information outreach and inreach, and through hands-on advice and other forms of support in order to facilitate and enhance their activities around UN conferences, events and processes.

With NGO activity now at an unprecedented level, NGOs can be found across the UN system, speaking to governments, serving on panels, holding briefings, forming issue caucuses, offering technical expertise, advocating on the national level, and implementing UN-related projects. NGO involvement varies across different subjects, bodies and processes, depending to some degree on the momentum of civil society activism outside the United Nations. NGOs have been consistently active at some of the UN bodies that meet regularly, primarily the Commission on Human Rights, the Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission on Sustainable Development. They have also played key roles in intergovernmental deliberations on the International Criminal Court, landmines and HIV/AIDS.

Secretary-General Kofi Annan has often applauded the many contributions of NGOs to the UN, referring to NGOs as partners in policy, and in policy execution. "I see a United Nations keenly aware that if the global agenda is to be properly addressed, a partnership with civil society is not an option; it is a necessity," he says. "I see a United Nations which recognizes that the NGO revolution—the new



global people-power—is the best thing that has happened to our Organization in a long time.”

### **Panel of Eminent Persons on UN Relations with Civil Society**

Following his September 2002 reform proposals, entitled *Strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change*, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan established a high-level panel on the interaction between the United Nations and civil society. On 13 February 2003, the UN Secretary-General appointed former Brazilian President Henrique Cardoso to chair the Panel of Eminent Persons on UN Relations with Civil Society. The Panel will hold and attend regional meetings, interview individuals or organizations of expertise, and conduct meetings with sector stakeholders. These consultations will feed into producing a set of practical recommendations for the consideration of the UN Secretary-General by April 2004.

Panel Members include: Ambassador Bagher Asadi (Iran), Dr. Manuel Castells (Spain), Ms. Birgitta Dahl (Sweden), Ms. Peggy Dulany (USA), Ambassador Andre Erdos (Hungary), Ms. Asma Khader (Jordan), Mr. Juan Mayr (Columbia), Ms. Malini Mehra (India), Mr. Kumi Naidoo (South Africa), Ms. Mary Racelis (the Philippines), Mr. Prakash Ratilal (Mozambique), and Ms. Aminata Traore (Mali).

More information on the High-Level Panel can be found online ([www.un.org/reform/panel.htm](http://www.un.org/reform/panel.htm)).





## **Chapter 1**

### **Accreditation**

While Member States make the decisions at the UN, NGOs can contribute to and influence these processes in a variety of ways, even if they do not vote or act as negotiating partners. Participation may be ongoing and touch upon multiple issues and events, or it may be confined to a specific meeting. In either case, NGOs can choose to partake in a wide range of strategies: interacting with Member States and the institutional arms of the UN; monitoring agreements; briefing governments on the concerns of citizens; circulating information in and outside the UN; advocating positions at the national level; underscoring links between national actions and international commitments; organizing caucuses to strengthen advocacy work; forging connections between the UN and NGOs around the world; and drawing the media's attention to the issues at hand.

Most forms of NGO participation in UN decision making start with applying for accreditation, the formal process that allows organizations or groups to attend UN meetings. Depending on the meeting and the form of accreditation, NGOs may receive a grounds pass allowing entrance to UN facilities; access to documents; permission to attend formal sessions; the opportunity to deliver written and oral statements; meeting space for some kinds of NGO

events; appropriate seating arrangements during public meetings; and the chance to interact with delegates, other NGOs and UN staff.

Accreditation is not an automatic privilege; organizations must meet certain criteria to obtain it and abide by certain guidelines to maintain it. Groups risk losing it when they fail to work within these parameters, or engage in conduct such as a politically motivated act against a Member State or the promotion of activities that violate the spirit of the UN Charter. Under no circumstances may NGOs use the UN logo, claim to represent the UN, receive diplomatic passports or tax exemptions, or consider themselves formally part of the UN system.

There are two basic forms of accreditation to the intergovernmental process: temporary for conference processes or ongoing, which is normally referred to as consultative status.

### **Temporary or conference accreditation**

For some major conferences or special sessions, Member States approve a process that enables NGOs to apply for temporary accreditation to that conference process alone. The accreditation lasts only as long as the process itself. The application process generally requires the following documents: copies of the latest annual report and most recent budget; copies of constitution by-laws and information on governing body composition; proof of non-profit status; a short statement of how the group's activities relate to the meeting; and a description of membership and the location of headquarters.

Deadlines and guidelines for temporary accreditation vary by conference or event, and groups should request information from the meeting's Secretariat well in advance. For world conferences, for example, NGOs must often be accredited to one of the Preparatory Committee meetings in order to gain registration for the final event. Such criteria are determined by the UN resolution on the conference rules, which include those for access of and the participation for NGOs

and other non-governmental actors and groups. The Secretariat reviews applications for accreditation in light of their conformity with the resolution and then forwards lists of those who meet the criteria for final approval by governments. To be eligible, NGOs usually have to show relevance and competence in the subject under discussion. NGOs that receive accreditation for conferences and special sessions are obliged to register upon arrival at each preparatory meeting as well as at the conference itself.

### **Consultative status or ongoing accreditation**

NGOs that are seeking a regular presence at the UN, or a more permanent relationship, can apply for ongoing status or consultative status with ECOSOC or one of the programmes, funds or autonomous specialized agencies.

**ECOSOC:** NGOs requesting affiliation with ECOSOC must prove that they are active on economic and social issues related to the Council's mandate. This form of accreditation, based on Article 71 of the UN Charter, is the foundation on which UN-NGO relations have been built, allowing access to all formal, routinely scheduled ECOSOC sessions. Organizations and groups with consultative status are usually invited to attend special UN meetings such as world conferences without having to submit to the approval process for accreditation. However, they are required to complete any registration or pre-registration conditions and requirements.

There are three categories of ECOSOC consultative status for NGOs: general, special and roster. General category NGOs are concerned with most of the activities of ECOSOC and its subsidiary organs. These groups tend to be fairly large and have members in many countries and in different regions. They may attend all meetings of ECOSOC and its subsidiaries, as well as speak before delegates, circulate statements and place items on the agenda. Every four years, they must submit quadrennial reports on their contributions to the work and goals of the UN.

Special category NGOs offer expertise on a few ECOSOC-related subjects. Like the general category organizations, they must provide quadrennial reports. They receive many of the same privileges, except they cannot place items on the agenda and their written statements are limited to 500 words, compared with 2,000 words for the general category organizations.

Roster category NGOs are those organizations that may make occasional contributions to ECOSOC's work and provide a specific technical perspective; many also enjoy consultative status with one of the UN's specialized agencies. They may attend meetings, but cannot speak or circulate statements. These groups are not obliged to submit quadrennial reports.

Obtaining ECOSOC consultative status involves writing a letter of intent to the NGO Section of the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs, which then sends out an application package, including a questionnaire and additional background information. Completed applications and supporting documentation must be received by June 1st of the year before the NGO wants to be considered by ECOSOC's 19-Member State NGO Committee. The Committee meets twice annually to discuss applications, with recommendations for approval forwarded to ECOSOC.

Requirements for obtaining consultative status:

- The activities of the applying NGO must be relevant to the Economic and Social Council;
- The NGO must have a democratic decision-making mechanism;
- The NGO must have officially registered existence for at least two years;
- The primary source of NGO funding must come from contributions by national affiliates, individual members or NGOs.

**Funds, programmes and autonomous specialized agencies:** NGOs focusing on a specific subject may seek some form of consultative status with one of the UN's funds, programmes or the autonomous

**A Recent Review: ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31**

In the mid-1990s, for the third time in UN history, ECOSOC reviewed its guidelines for NGO participation. The Council appointed an Open-Ended Working Group, which met over the course of nearly three years to consider amendments to the rules (a move first called for by NGOs at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio).

The result was ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31, which standardized arrangements for accrediting NGOs to UN conferences, streamlined the process of applying for ECOSOC consultative status, and opened the application process to national, subregional and regional NGOs. It offered a right of redress for NGOs who are refused ECOSOC accreditation or who lose their consultative status. It also drew a clear distinction between NGOs and Member States, noting that arrangements for consultation do not accord to NGOs the same rights of participation as member governments. ECOSOC has also encouraged all economic and social bodies in the UN system to review their procedures for NGO participation against the Council's standards. In particular, the Council recommended that the General Assembly begin examining the role of NGOs in all areas of the UN.

specialized agencies. These relationships vary considerably, from the World Health Organization and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, who cooperate closely with and consider NGOs integral to their work on a variety of fronts, to the International Monetary Fund, which has no formal system of relations with NGOs. NGOs affiliated with the funds and programmes may be able to participate in sessions of the Executive Boards. They may be called upon to address the board, but they do not have any formal role in decision making.

In the case of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which is completely outside of the UN system, at this point in time there is no formal accreditation procedure other than for its ministerial meetings, which are held every other year.

**DESA NGO Section:** DESA's NGO section acts as the substantive secretariat of the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs. It also acts as a focal point within the United Nations Secretariat for all matters related to the consultative relationship between the United Nations and NGOs (see pages 53-55). It maintains a website ([www.un.org/esa/coordination/ngo](http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/ngo)) and provides regular mailings of UN information materials.

**Department of Public Information (DPI):** Another avenue for access to the UN is through the NGO Section of the DPI. A central criteria for association is that the NGO possess an information and communications programme capable of providing and disseminating news and information about the United Nations in its thematic area of work. For the 1,400 NGOs associated with DPI, as well as for those in consultative status with ECOSOC, the NGO Section conducts an extensive information programme that includes, on an annual basis, 30 briefings, three communications workshops, a two-day orientation programme for new NGO representatives, and the annual three-day DPI/NGO Conference, the premier NGO event at UN Headquarters in New York each year.

The NGO Section provides up to three grounds passes for NGO representatives who wish access to the Secretariat building in New York. It operates the DPI/NGO Resource Centre at UN Headquarters where associated NGO representatives can meet and work. It maintains a web site ([www.un.org/dpi/ngosection](http://www.un.org/dpi/ngosection)), and provides access to official UN documents system-wide, regular monthly mailings of UN information materials and the issuance of a weekly electronic and hard-copy newsletter, "DPI/NGO Link," and a monthly calendar of events. The Section publishes a Directory of NGOs associated with DPI every two years. The electronic version of the Directory is available on the NGO Section website. DPI NGOs elect an 18-member Executive Committee that works closely with the Department on events and programmes, including the annual DPI/NGO Conference.

**United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS):** While NGLS has no formal responsibilities in the UN's accreditation system,



many of its activities support the participation of NGOs in UN deliberations. For example, NGLS brings sustainable development, human rights, including women's rights, peace and disarmament, and other issues being addressed by the UN to the attention of NGOs through its publications, information outreach and communications programme. NGLS publishes a bimonthly newsletter, entitled the *Go Between*, which covers a range of UN activities, areas of cooperation between the UN and NGOs, and other news. *NGLS Roundups* provide indepth focus on a particular issue or UN process. NGLS also updates on a regular basis its two practical guides to the UN: *The UN System: A Guide for NGOs*, and *The NGLS Handbook of UN Agencies, Programmes, Funds and Conventions*. These and other NGLS publications can be found online ([www.unsystem.org/ngls](http://www.unsystem.org/ngls)).

In addition to its outreach and publications work, NGLS also organizes and supports different types of meetings and consultations involving the UN system and NGOs. In the past ten years, NGLS has enabled over 4,000 developing country NGOs to participate in UN conference processes. NGLS's current work priorities include the Millennium Development Goals, follow-up and implementation of the UN world conferences, and supporting the work of the Secretary-General's High Level Panel, which is currently reviewing UN-Civil Society relations (see box page 49).





## **Chapter 2**

### **Preparing for a Meeting**

For NGOs already accredited or who have started the application process, the next step towards constructive and effective participation in a meeting is developing an advocacy strategy and making logistical arrangements. The bottom line: the more prepared the NGO is, the more effective their work will be.

**Be Targeted and Informed:** It is important to begin by defining what is to be achieved at the meeting—subsequent activities can be tailored to meet these goals. Research the meeting by gathering documentation that is available in advance. Such documentation may include previously negotiated resolutions, government statements, and questionnaires sent by the UN to governments to solicit their views. Many UN materials can be found on the Internet, and others can be obtained by being placed on the mailing list of the meeting's Secretariat. Reading these documents carefully will shed insight into the international dimensions of the issue and reveal the positions being taken on the issues of concern. It can also increase awareness of the many different points of view, providing information which could be useful in the strategic positioning of advocacy efforts. If some subjects are found to be missing, create a list of those that should be proposed for inclusion. It is important to establish priorities

for objectives, issues, activities and resources, and to understand, generally speaking, that not everything will be achieved.

**Reach Out:** Preparations could also include making contact with other NGOs working within the specific country or region or on the international level. Some international NGOs have extensive experience working with the UN, and may be willing to share advice and support with those who are new to the field. The Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO) monitors issues of NGO participation and access to the UN and works to facilitate NGO participation. Ask other NGOs about their goals and priorities, and see if there are points of common ground. Collaborative preparations often generate political momentum, attract public interest and avoid unnecessary duplication of work. Networking and information-sharing in general can maximize both impact and resources, particularly on the national level, when many NGOs do not have the resources or capacity to participate physically in international meetings. In some cases, organizations pool funds to send one person to the meeting to represent all of them.

Well in advance, begin finding out who will attend the meeting from the home government. Since UN negotiations often start many months and even years before the final meeting, making contact with the appropriate officials, both within the diplomatic team and at the national level, can be an opportunity to begin learning about how the government is positioning itself on different issues, how open it is to altering these positions, and whether it is willing to consider incorporating any NGO proposals. Government delegates may be a mix of mission staff based at UN Headquarters in New York or Geneva, plus officials from one or more ministries in the capital. Some delegations include NGO members as well, although they are not usually entitled to speak on behalf of the government.

Draw up a list of news media and individual journalists that can receive press releases and other materials before and during the meeting. Start by contacting relevant journalists, alerting them to one

or two key issues at the meeting, and keep them updated through press releases. Look at other publications in terms of the audiences they reach, and whether they have covered the meeting's issues in the past. Identify journalists who have covered similar stories; make contact to inform them of the meeting; and put them on a distribution list for press releases.

Finally, establish links with UN staff at the Secretariat who are responsible for liaising with NGOs. Another useful step would be to identify Secretariat staff who are writing reports on substantive issues and enquire how to contribute relevant information. The UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) in Geneva and New York tracks many meetings and can provide information or answer questions about preparations. The NGLS website ([www.unsystem.org/ngls](http://www.unsystem.org/ngls)) also provides a number of relevant documents and publications, as well as links to the UN system and NGO liaison offices.

**Be Prepared:** Once the background research on the meeting has been carried out, it may be beneficial to make contact with other participants. The next step towards preparation would be to draft position papers. These are best limited to a couple of pages at most, with a clear statement of proposals for actions to be taken by governments and the UN system. Send the position papers in advance to government officials, the meeting's Secretariat and other NGOs. Provide them as well to relevant journalists, suggesting that they write a story in advance of the meeting. This spreads public awareness and can strengthen support on certain issues.

From a strategic perspective, it is important to determine not only how many representatives can attend the meeting, but who is the best prepared. Aside from issue expertise, a variety of other skills may be required, such as lobbying delegates, organizing NGO caucuses, writing and delivering speeches, and working effectively with the media. It is also important to consider sending representatives to preparatory meetings that are held normally in the year or more before a major world conference, as many

negotiations are well on their way to being concluded during the preparatory process for the final event. Inter-sessional meetings and activities organized by governments are also important parts of the preparatory process and should not be missed.

Those who attend the meeting may want to arrive at least a day or two in advance, as many NGO preparatory events take place in the days before the meeting opens. Likewise, they may want to stay at least a day after the meeting is scheduled to end, as negotiations often run past the official deadline.

Large-scale international meetings, such as UN world conferences and summits, may also be accompanied by an independent NGO Forum, which usually starts a few days in advance of the intergovernmental meeting. Forums include workshops, panel discussions, displays, demonstrations and other activities organized by advocates from around the world. Some form of national NGO organizing and host committee oversees these gatherings; information is usually available from the conference Secretariat on a wide range of subjects, including whom to contact in order to hold an event, meeting logistics, or for other purposes.

**What to Bring:** Bring a copy of all correspondence concerning accreditation. The UN Secretariat often sends a letter identifying the participant as an official representative of the organization. Presentation of this letter will be required, as well as a passport or some other form of official photo identification for the issuing of a grounds pass.

Bring copies of position papers, in multiple UN languages if possible; materials about the organization; business cards; extra letterhead; and other office supplies that may be needed. Bringing electronic equipment—such as a mobile phone or portable laptop and printer—may also prove to be useful. While computer and Internet facilities are generally available at UN conferences, there are usually long waiting lines to use them, or they may be off-limits after certain hours.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Follow-up and Implementation**

At every major UN meeting, there are set groups of key participants: governments, the Secretariat, UN agencies, NGOs, private sector representatives and the media. Participation is governed by strict rules that cover everything from who may attend the meeting to the order of speakers. Understanding this protocol is every bit as important as knowledge of the substantive issues. It is important to stress here that not understanding these rules leads quickly to frustration and can impair efforts. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Following protocol allows for a more effective focus on working with governments, collaborating with other NGOs, and exploring the many other opportunities for advancing concerns on the issues. Resolution 1996/31 defines the consultative relationship between the United Nations and NGOs, and urges them "to make positive contributions to the work of the UN."

**How to Approach Governments:** By far, the most important players in UN decision making are the governments. The ability of NGOs to influence an outcome agreement depends on identifying governments who are sympathetic to their views and willing to work collaboratively. However, it may also be useful to interact with governments who have a differing point of view. As negotiations proceed and particularly as they draw to a close, some positions may

**Seeking Access? Whom to Consult:**

While NGOs may not be formally permitted to attend informal sessions of negotiations between governments, they may still be able to observe. In the past, NGOs have been able to gain access through a sympathetic chair, either by approaching him or her directly or through the Secretariat. Another alternative is to work with governments who may be willing to bring the question up with the meeting's Bureau. Final approval must come from the group of delegates at large.

be withdrawn or exchanged for concessions in other areas. Viewing the overall picture can prove helpful in thinking about how to advance the relevant issues, whether this could mean holding a press briefing, delivering a speech, or a number of other activities.

It is also important to have a clear idea of which subjects are so politically sensitive or intractable that the potential for impact may be low. In addition, passages of text that have already been agreed in earlier negotiations are only rarely re-opened. Advocacy efforts should be devoted to the subjects that governments are still negotiating.

With these general guidelines in mind, the first step in working with governments is knowing when and where it is appropriate to approach them. Not all meetings are automatically accessible to NGOs, even to sit in as observers. UN security guards or Secretariat staff members will ask uninvited persons to leave the meeting.

Much of the interaction between governments and NGOs takes place immediately before or after a negotiating session, when delegates are free to talk and tend to mingle on the floor of the negotiating room. In order to distinguish who is from which government, delegates sit behind their country nameplates during the session. Social functions, such as receptions and lunches, provide other chances for informal discussion. Some delegates may also be willing to present national, regional or negotiating group priorities at special NGO briefings or



NGO caucus meetings. All of these forms of exchange can be opportunities to build relationships that can later be transformed into a delegation's willingness to review a position paper or consider suggestions for negotiating the language of the outcome document.

The second step in working with delegations is knowing who to approach. Experts from ministries or capitals are more likely to have a substantive understanding of the issues than professional diplomats based at the UN. On the other hand, these diplomats may have a better understanding of how to manage the political currents and UN procedures in their favour. Individual personalities, preferences and styles can sometimes make a big difference to the course of negotiations. Contact can also be made with other NGOs who sometimes serve on delegations.

Finally, the third step is understanding how to approach governments. Most likely there will not be time for a long, complicated discussion. Therefore it is critical to know the most important priority issue in advance, and focus the message clearly and concisely to support it. Written information about the topic or the organization may be useful, but keep in mind that most delegates will be negotiating all day and attending diplomatic functions in the evening, in addition to writing reports and having to read through the documents produced by the UN Secretariat itself. The more accessible the information presented, the more chances there are of it being paid attention to or used.

These same rules apply to submitting suggestions for language and for writing speeches. Offering a language proposal requires tracking the negotiations closely and knowing what the different positions are and who is supporting what. UN language is extremely subtle and highly legalistic; a comma can make a political difference. Delegates must function within these parameters, and so are more likely to accept an NGO proposal if it abides by the same terms. Understand also that progress in adopting language is incremental and based on precedent, and that delegates may go over a passage many times before its final adoption. A radically rewritten suggestion will most likely not be taken seriously.

Before approaching a potentially sympathetic delegate:

- n be aware of what language has been previously agreed at the UN on the subject at hand;
- n know what has already been discussed at this meeting on the issue;
- n incorporate this knowledge in language that follows UN style.

Present a clean copy of the existing text with the amendments clearly underlined or marked in bold. If a delegate does accept the proposal, be sure to express appreciation, and be aware that the contribution will not be publicly acknowledged.

### **Decoding Language: the Power of Verbs**

Thriving in the UN requires not just political skill, but also a finely tuned understanding of the nuances and balance of language. Not all negotiated UN documents are legally binding, but delegates are schooled in containing anything that might later prove politically problematic.

They look at language from several perspectives. One is the position of a word or sentence within the document as a whole. Text appearing in an operative paragraph, which requires action, has a different weight than text in a preambular paragraph, which is meant to provide mainly background information.

A common point of contention is over the choice of a verb—one of the most powerful parts of speech. Verbs determine different levels of commitment to an issue or action, and when delegates disagree with a proposal but sense they won't be able to eliminate it, they often counter by watering down the verbs. Such verbs include: endorse, decide, welcome, call upon, invite, encourage, recognize, acknowledge, reaffirm, express concern, take note with appreciation, and take note. Perhaps almost as important as verbs are adverbs. The use of "as appropriate" can strip a sentence or clause of any meaning or importance.

There is more scope to address priorities in written speeches for delivery during open or formal sessions, when NGOs are allowed to speak to all assembled governments. Still, it is important to target the message. Delegates may have already listened to hours of speeches, as

NGOs generally speak last. Come up with no more than three key points. State them clearly and concisely, and support them with facts, figures or anecdotes that will grab attention. Make concrete proposals for action that are linked to specific subjects currently being negotiated. Time limits are usually given—find out what this is from the Secretariat, and contribute to goodwill by abiding by them. Deliver the speech slowly so that the interpreters can keep up.

Combining efforts with other NGOs to prepare a joint speech, which can be a statement of strength and solidarity, may mean that the speech will be taken more seriously by governments. However, state clearly which NGO(s) are being represented. Have copies of the speech and make them available to delegates, the Secretariat, interpreters, the media and other NGOs.

**Working with the Secretariat:** The UN Secretariat prepares reports on the issues for consideration and provides guidance to delegates on protocol and rules of procedure; provides information on

### **Security: Following the Rules**

As a high-profile political organization, the UN must take a variety of security precautions, which can include the x-raying of visitors' briefcases to the occasional use of bomb-sniffing dogs. After the 11 September attacks in the United States, security regulations have become stricter. How rigorously they are applied depends to some extent on who is in the building. Heads of State or a large number of high-level officials are reasons for the security system to shift into high gear.

Respecting the rules of conduct as well as the decisions made by security personnel is part of working at the UN. Don't expect any latitude in this regard. For example, holding demonstrations on UN premises, arguing vehemently with guards or using someone else's identification badge are all reasons for being barred future entry. While these activities may seem politically expedient or convenient at the time, having privileges revoked may prevent the realization of longer-term goals.

previous agreements and legal issues; handles accreditation; and makes logistical arrangements, including setting up facilities for NGOs, briefings with delegations and press conferences. Establishing contact with the Secretariat staff responsible for working with NGOs helps ensure these processes work smoothly. They can also be an important source of information. In advance of a meeting, identify Secretariat staff who are writing reports on substantive issues and enquire about how to submit useful and relevant information.

**Building Momentum with Other NGOs:** Working with other NGOs can be one of the most important strategies for influencing an international or regional UN meeting. Even NGOs who disagree about some priorities may find areas where they can work together. Sometimes this may provide a way to ensure all the work gets done; in other cases it allows groups to learn from each other. Often there is an NGO room where organizations can gather documents and share information. They can also hold meetings, although these have to be open to all if they take place in UN facilities.

Methods for working together vary across meetings, are regularly and creatively modified, and are completely optional. However, some common joint strategies include:

**Organize a daily briefing:** This usually takes place either first thing in the morning, at the end of the day, or at both times. It allows NGOs to share perspectives, exchange information on government positions and coordinate advocacy efforts. If no daily briefing has been scheduled, NGOs might find it useful to speak with other NGOs.

**Create a caucus:** Caucuses can be a highly effective way for like-minded advocates who have similar priorities to work together around issues, by region or by constituency. Building a team allows the members to follow multiple meetings, pool different forms of expertise, and devise common strategies. Caucuses often carry enough weight to be able to deliver a statement or call for a briefing by delegations closely connected to their subjects. These briefings provide a chance to

interact with delegates and also hear the delegation's perspectives on the course of the negotiations. Country or regional caucuses can work together to provide proposals to their government delegations.

**Form a monitoring team:** It is labour intensive to track all facets of government negotiations, yet this can be critical to understanding how they are progressing, and which elements are being traded towards consensus. Sometimes, delegates break into two or more working groups that meet all day and late into the evening. A team of NGO monitors ensures that everything can be followed. Team members can then report back to other NGOs at a daily briefing or within a caucus.

**Produce information resources:** A daily newspaper or newsletter on the meeting that is lively, covers a variety of events and offers different points of view attracts the attention of participants at all levels. It can also be beneficial to produce and distribute brief information sheets on particular issues, perhaps presenting some key perspectives and statistics. Find out from the meeting Secretariat what the procedures are for making NGO documents available. There are usually specific tables and racks identified for this purpose.

**Work with the Press:** Journalists from national and internationally circulated newspapers, magazines, televisions, radio stations and Internet publications, both mainstream and alternative, cover major UN meetings. Media advocacy can be a useful strategy for mobilizing public support.

The UN Department of Public Information (DPI) is responsible for managing and coordinating the UN relationship with the press. It organizes a press room, holds daily briefings, distributes press releases and organizes press conferences. NGOs can work with the Secretariat and DPI to hold press conferences featuring NGO speakers.

Always keep in mind that journalists at the UN will rarely come looking for a story; instead go to them using contacts established

before the meeting started. Otherwise, seek out journalists from publications at home or with journalists that share interest in the same issues. Try to think of one or two “angles” in advance. Good examples could be emerging issues that haven’t been covered extensively in the past, or a newsworthy breakthrough in the negotiations on the issue being covered. Being able to provide an informed point of view on such issues can generate interest and raise awareness. Prepare a few facts and figures that will help convince journalists they can find a solid story. Don’t offer long documents or large quantities of information: most journalists don’t have time to sift through it. Many journalists must file their stories by the end of the day. Old news cannot be used the following morning, so the earlier the information is submitted, the greater the likelihood it may be used. In some cases, momentum can also be built from the UN’s press releases as journalists are always seeking multiple perspectives. They may welcome a timely phone call or short e-mail message with an interesting quote.

## **Arenas for Activism**

In the past, NGOs have been particularly active in a handful of UN decision-making processes. These include:

**Conferences:** NGOs wielded considerable influence throughout the cycle of large world conferences that took place during the 1990s, starting with the 1990 World Summit for Children. Tens of thousands of organizations attended the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, the 1995 World Summit on Social Development, the 1996 Habitat II conference on housing and urban development, and the 1996 World Food Summit. An even wider spectrum of NGOs than ever before participated, including large numbers of national groups. Many saw these events primarily as opportunities for networking on an unprecedented global scale. They exchanged

experiences, articulated new and unconventional ideas, and held colorful events that drew international media attention.

However, many NGOs also began to recognize more clearly the need to work with the formal intergovernmental process. The UN itself, starting with the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development, encouraged this trend. A record number of NGOs attended consultative, preparatory and conference processes, and events and fora. At the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development a well-prepared women's caucus, organized by leading women's groups, helped to shift the international population debate from centering on population control to underscoring the empowerment of women as essential to balancing population and development.

The International Conference on Financing for Development process, which began in 1998 and culminated in a world conference in 2002, encouraged new forms of participation by groups outside the United Nations. The conference preparations relied heavily on input from NGOs and business representatives, who attended a series of hearings and gave presentations that were incorporated into the intergovernmental discussions.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), which took place in 2002, included a number of dialogues in its preparations as well as at the Summit itself with Major Groups: NGOs, indigenous peoples, local authorities, business and industry, science and technology, trade unions, farmers, youth and women. The main outcome of the Summit was its emphasis on the implementation of the intergovernmental agreements on sustainable development reached over the previous decade and of the necessity of engaging Major Groups and other stakeholders in this process.

**ECOSOC:** Among all the regularly scheduled UN discussions, NGOs are most active in ECOSOC and some of the ECOSOC commission meetings, where they find the widest latitude for participation. Some commissions, like the Commission on

Sustainable Development (CSD), consider NGOs as an integral part of their process and have pioneered innovative formats such as multi-stakeholder dialogue sessions. NGOs themselves often view the commissions as connected most closely to their advocacy issues—at least in the social, economic and rights spheres. For the first time at the annual session of the Economic and Social Council, in 2001, the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO), with support from NGLS, organized an NGO Forum linked to the high-level segment in order for NGOs to be able to express their key recommendations.

NGOs accredited to ECOSOC under the general status category may even propose new agenda items, a privilege reserved elsewhere for governments. In addition, language agreed in the commissions may later be approved without debate in the General Assembly, thus receiving high-level endorsement.

An insistence on focusing exclusively on the commissions, however, does not recognize that commissions carry less political gravitas in the UN system than either ECOSOC or the General Assembly. Many issues originate in ECOSOC or the General Assembly that are not taken up elsewhere, including in the commissions. As well, not all agreements struck within the commissions are endorsed at higher levels.

**New Forms of Participation:** In recent years, the UN has begun to explore the possible benefits of new forms of participatory decision making, including multi-stakeholder dialogues, civil society hearings and roundtables between Heads of State and civil society. These are designed to bring together people who are involved with a particular issue to exchange perspectives and experiences. In general, the different mechanisms aim to promote better decision making through wider input; integrate diverse viewpoints; develop trust and partnership; and mobilize commitment to implementation of decisions.

This new approach has generated substantial interest. Aside from the annual meeting of the CSD, recent processes that have



incorporated new forms of participation include the 2002 International Conference on Financing for Development and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. The Security Council has also increased its Arria Formula informal meetings on specific topics, which may include NGOs.

## **Away from the Meeting**

**Local, National and Regional Work:** Not all NGOs can attend a UN meeting, but they can do a great deal of important work without being physically present. In fact, work on the international level counts for little without support at the regional, national and local levels. Long before the meeting begins, for example, national NGOs can make contact with other civil society organizations and speak with government officials who are preparing national positions. They may be able to make suggestions on policies, provide inputs to country reports and urge that the delegation include an NGO representative.

NGOs may also mobilize awareness among the general public through the press or other kinds of education campaigns. They can work with parliamentarians, who can call for discussions on government policies or preparations for the meetings. They can gather together to achieve greater influence in advocating certain issues, attend regional preparatory meetings and compile alternative local, national and regional reports. Finally, they can still monitor the progress and outcome of the meeting through documents and press releases available on the UN website, through connections with delegates, or through links with other national or international NGOs who have been able to attend.

**Monitoring and Implementing Decisions:** UN agreements are only the first step in the process of achieving the aims that they express. Their central importance lies in follow-up at the national level. Many agreements contain references to establishing follow-up mechanisms,

methods of evaluating implementation and sources of funding. It is primarily the responsibility of national governments and international organizations to use these tools to transform commitments and obligations into reality.

However, NGOs can also play a role in carrying decisions forward after a meeting has concluded, mainly through monitoring and encouraging national governments and international agencies to act on their promises. This process can be started by obtaining an official copy of the final agreement, either on the Internet or by contacting the Secretariat. The next step would be to identify the relevant governmental departments responsible for implementation, or continue working with official contacts that have been made during the course of the meeting. Contact should be maintained as well with regional and international NGO networks to exchange information on strategies and practices for ensuring accountability. Finally, one might consider organizing a meeting within a few months after the UN session where an action plan and set of commitments to follow-up can be developed. Invite relevant actors—including government representatives, other NGOs, the media, academics, private sector representatives, donors and UN organizations—to assess progress and brainstorm on next steps.