

STUDY AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

for

TRANSFORMING THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM: DESIGNS FOR A WORKABLE WORLD

by

Joseph E. Schwartzberg
Director Emeritus, The Workable World Trust

and

Nancy J. Dunlavy
Director, The Workable World Trust



The Workable World Trust
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Unit 10: Engaging Civil Society: NGOs and Other Non-State Actors (p. 179-200)

Why Is This Important? (p. 179-180)

To quote Kofi Annan: *“A strong civil society promotes responsible citizenship and makes democratic forms of government work. A weak civil society supports authoritarian rule, which keeps society weak.”* The legitimacy and effectiveness of decisions and policies will be enhanced when they are backed by expert advice and when stakeholders, acting individually or in coalitions, feel that they have had a meaningful voice. Sound advice is especially important in our increasingly complex and inter-connected world. Unsurprisingly, in recent decades the number of specialized non-governmental organizations (NGOs) established to deal with urgent global problems (the environment, human rights, etc.) has grown by leaps and bounds and is now estimated at more than a million. Of these, more than 250,000 with an international mandate are also known as INGOs. Well over 3,000 NGOs have been accredited to the UN via ECOSOC. Added to the chorus are the voices of special interest groups (e.g., organized labor), powerful multi-national corporations (MNCs), multi-purpose foundations, the media, professional societies, faith-based organizations, and other components of what is loosely referred to as civil society. How to bring a modicum of order to the cacophony of competing voices and agendas is the principal challenge addressed in this Unit.

Key Issues (p. 180-187)

Though decidedly positive overall, the proliferation of agencies also has some negative aspects for the United Nations system:

1. The glut of information produced is largely indigestible, often inconsistent, redundant or sometimes even inaccurate.
2. NGO agendas are often in opposition to one another (e.g. “pro-life” and “pro-choice” agencies in respect to abortion and birth control).
3. Worthy NGOs from the global South generally lack the numbers and financial and professional resources to compete for influence with major NGOs of the global North; this is particularly evident at major international conferences (on the environment, population, human rights, etc.) and at the periodic World Social Forum.

4. **NGOs and supportive UN agencies are often pitted against alliances of powerful MNCs and business-friendly governments (e.g., as in opposition to the WTO, given its allegedly anti-environmental and anti-labor policies).**
5. **Many NGOs are, for a variety of reasons, of dubious merit, among them the spurious so-called “GONGOs” (government-organized non-governmental organizations).**
6. **Wealthy, unaccountable corporations and foundations can leverage their financial power to bend programs and priorities of particular agencies with the UN system to their own advantage.**

Possible Solutions (p. 187-197)

1. **Five self-financing “civil society coordinating councils” (CSCCs) are proposed, one each to deal with: human rights, the environment, development, peace and security, and democratic governance.**
 - **Participation in the election of and work in one or more CSCC would be open to any NGO on condition of paying small membership fees, abiding by the council’s code of conduct, and filing annual activity reports.**
 - **Failure to adhere to the stated conditions could result in expulsion from a CSCC.**
 - **NGOs could organize in ad hoc coalitions to deal with specific issues or issue clusters (e.g., women’s rights, rights for indigenous peoples).**
 - **Coalition reports and proposals would be forwarded to appropriate CSCCs, which would, in turn, consolidate and organize them and send them, as needed, to the appropriate UN agency (e.g. HRC).**
 - **Each CSCC would be responsible for two-way information flows between appropriate organs of the UN and civil society organizations (CSOs).**
 - **Dissenting opinions and reports may become a part of the record.**
 - **Recipient UN agencies would evaluate CSCC reports, take action where desirable and feasible, and forward them, with their own recommendations, to other concerned UN agencies.**
 - **The voting weight of each participating NGO would depend on a formula taking into account its annual budget, the number of countries in which it operates, and its status (if any, as assigned by ECOSOC/ESEC) as a UN accredited agency.**
 - **The share of each major world region in the membership of each CSCC would depend on a formula taking into account the region’s**

population and the cumulative weights of member NGOs. On balance, this measure would enhance the relative power of the global South.

- NGOs in countries with GNIs above the world average would be required to help subsidize participation of NGOs from poor countries according to a sliding income scale.
2. The private business sector should increasingly be incorporated into local development plans through “global compacts” (GCs), voluntarily negotiated among one or more host countries, one or more MNCs and one or more UN agencies.
- GCs would be *ad hoc*, varying greatly in scale, type and duration.
 - GCs would be required to follow established codes of conduct, file annual reports and accept oversight by an appropriate agency.
 - Participating firms that failed egregiously to meet established norms could be excluded from a GC roster.

QUESTIONS:

1. *How does the UN presently work with civil society, and how might those interactions be improved in the relatively short term?*
2. *Presently, there is nothing remotely like the proposed CSCCs. Do you think that so complicated a system could work? Would its recommendations be regarded as fair? Would they be wise? How could fairness and wisdom be encouraged among such councils?*
3. *The global compact system is already well established and has had some major successes. But might it not represent an unacceptable threat to local modes of production and governance? If so, what changes are needed?*