

# ***The Role of Civil Society in Strengthening Global Governance***

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank the organizers of the Princeton Colloquium on Public and International Affairs for this opportunity to discuss with you the role of civil society in the strengthening of democratic governance.

The rise of civil society is one of the landmark events of our times.

At the national level, civic engagement expands the resources invested in development. Wherever there is a vibrant civil society, representative democracy is being supplemented and enriched by participatory democracy.

At the global level, civil society organizations are reshaping multilateralism. They are also producing some of the most innovative proposals and initiatives to deal with global threats.

Democracy has, historically, been a national construction. Civic engagement promoted the advancement of democracy by giving visibility to problems, testing innovative approaches, overseeing government, building social capital and promoting active citizenship.

What is radically new in the contemporary phenomenon of citizen action is the extension of the participation and responsibility to the global public sphere.

In today's world, critical problems cut across national territorial jurisdictions and are being debated by a variety of civic associations in a widening public space.

Global threats, such as financial volatility, environmental disasters, terrorism, drugs and contagious diseases, affect people's lives everywhere. They are of such a complexity that no country and no government can address them on their own.

Global governance is no longer the sole domain of governments. It now includes a broad variety of non state actors: NGOs, social movements, trade unions, the private sector, faith-based organizations.

As a consequence, the patterns of relationship between State and civil society are being drastically reshaped. Until very recently, in many parts of the world, this relationship was of conflict and rivalry. In others, collaboration was seen as the natural order of things.

In the United States the notion of private action for the public good is as old as the nation.

Daniel Boorstin observes that in the US “communities were voluntary and arose before government. There were many groups of people with a common sense of purpose and a feeling of duty to one another before there were political institutions forcing them to perform their duties”.

This, of course, was not the reality in Latin America . In our region – as in Eastern Europe – for too long the State imposed itself upon society. Civil society evolved out of small circles of freedom and resistance to authoritarian states.

Citizen participation was at the very heart of our societies' transition to democracy. Civil society grew in strength as civic freedoms were restored.

Huge progress was made in the last twenty years. Brazilian society today is more informed, participatory and responsible than at any other moment in our history.

By working closely with people and communities, NGOs accumulated a wealth of knowledge and experience that positioned them as vital partners of the State in the promotion of development. Hence the challenge for any democratically elected government to open fresh channels of dialogue and partnership with civil society.

As president of Brazil for eight years I can testify to the immense value of respecting, listening to and linking up with the source of energy brought by civil society.

Let me take one concrete example to make my point.

Brazil has arguably one of the best programs to fight AIDS. I am deeply convinced that the key factor in the Brazilian mobilization against this global threat is the dynamic interplay between citizen initiatives and public policies.

In our country as elsewhere, the initial association of AIDS with so-called risk groups might have led to stigma and discrimination. Silence and denial only breed despair and waste of precious time.

Associations of people living with AIDS were the first to speak up and denounce the risks of discrimination.

A national network on HIV-AIDS and Human Rights gave social and political visibility to a problem that seemed to concern only a small number of people.

In response, the Federal Government took the decisive step to establish a national coordinating structure, with the participation of state and non-state actors.

At a very early stage, a comprehensive strategy to fight AIDS was put into place. The outcome was a public policy in the truest sense of the word: task and responsibility of all sectors of society and of all levels of government.

With the support of the World Bank, operational partnerships were established with non-governmental organizations. Innovative projects tested new approaches to prevention and care.

Pressure from public opinion led to the approval by Congress of a special national legislation ensuring the right of free and universal access to antiviral drugs.

To sustain this policy it was absolutely essential to lower the price of the drugs. This goal was achieved through governmental support to the local production of generic versions of antiviral drugs.

This compelled pharmaceutical companies to sharply reduce its prices. Guaranteed access to treatment and full respect for human rights encouraged people to accept voluntary and confidential testing.

Local authorities were encouraged to create, at the municipal level, coordinating structures to extend the program's outreach in a decentralized way.

Thanks to these broad partnerships, Brazil demonstrated that AIDS is not an intractable problem. The expansion of the epidemics was stopped.

There were, of course, moments of tension and sharp disagreements among the actors involved in this process. But we have all learned that it is not necessary to agree on everything to collaborate. Different partners can pool their resources together while maintaining their respective identities and beliefs.

The success of the program gave Brazil the moral and political strength to respond to the charge made by the United States that our policy of inducing cost reduction in drug prices violated WTO regulations.

A spontaneous international alliance was formed to support free access to life-saving technologies. Leading NGOs, the scientific community and organizations of people living with HIV mobilized world public opinion. UN resolutions urged WTO to find the proper balance between patent rights and public health.

On the very day of the opening in New York , in June 2001, of the Special Session of the UN General Assembly on AIDS, the complaint against Brazil was withdrawn. I have no doubt in my mind that this favorable outcome was decisively influenced by civil society and public opinion.

Civil society, through its networks, helped to link the global with the local. In Brazil , they mobilized the

energies and resources needed to deal with a national health emergency. With their counterparts in other countries, they promoted global policy changes that mirror the strategies we adopted in Brazil.

One of the most important lessons from the Brazilian experience is that an energetic civil society, working together with government, far from weakening national sovereignty, strengthens the country's voice in global issues.

Another key lesson is that, in today's world, it is hardly possible to sustain a policy that is rejected by public opinion.

The way in which the international community is responding to the AIDS crisis is a significant example of the immense changes that are taking place under our very eyes in the patterns of democratic governance.

Civil society and public opinion are much more powerful. The roles of all actors – state and non-state - are changing. Hence, the ways in which they interact also had to change.

These changes could not fail to have a profound impact in the United Nations and in the intergovernmental process.

In the nineties, the UN made full use of its convening power and moral leadership to open up spaces for the public debate of social issues.

The global conferences of the decade enabled civil society and other actors to come together with governments to shape global priorities. Democracy and development were at the core of a twenty-first century common agenda.

That was a time of optimism and high expectations.

At the turn of the Millennium, however, the sense of progress towards inclusive governance and equitable development started to be replaced by acute disappointment.

The risks associated with globalization exposed the deficits in global governance. In particular, the gap between economics and politics, the discrepancy between the interdependence of markets and the lack of effective mechanisms for regulation and control.

Citizens began to lose faith in the political process insofar as decisions affecting their lives were increasingly taken in restricted arenas.

In response to this narrowing of the spaces for public debate a strong protest movement took to the streets. A radical critique of globalization emerged and the legitimacy of multilateral institutions was challenged.

All these trends were exacerbated in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11. The fight against terrorism became the topmost priority. However, unilateral action in the name of national security undermined the UN and multilateralism.

Most of today's conflicts are no longer between national states but rather within states or between states and 'uncivil' groups or networks. New fault-lines divide and pit social and cultural systems against each other.

The risks of division and deadlock within the international system are real. On the other hand, as most crises do, the current one is also producing new visions and opportunities.

I am convinced that neither the existing asymmetries of power and deficits of democracy nor the current threats to global governance can be worked out exclusively from within the intergovernmental system. Governments alone cannot resolve today's global problems.

The way out of the impasse can only come from processes and initiatives whose logic is different and goes beyond that of the inter-state power politics.

This perception has been strengthened by my experience over the last year as chair of the UN Panel on Civil Society Relations. This Panel was created by Secretary-General Kofi Annan to review the interaction between the United Nations and civil society and make recommendations for improvement.

UN-civil society relationship had grown exponentially over the preceding decades, prospects were very high but so were difficulties and tensions. NGOs felt frustrated with the obstacles to substantive participation in policy-making and in the implementation of agreed programs. Member States felt that civil society participation in decision-making was undermining the intergovernmental process.

It was essential to reduce distrust, demonstrate the effectiveness of collaboration and build consensus around a constructive agenda for the future.

In our extensive process of consultations we realized that some of most innovative initiatives to address global questions are today being driven by civil society and other non-state actors. They include:

- Global policy alliances and transnational networks – such as the coalitions of like-minded actors to ban landmines, support the International Criminal Court or influence negotiations at the the WTO;
- Operational partnerships involving multiple stakeholders – including private companies - such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria or the Global Water Partnership;
- Mobilization of world opinion and political pressure through campaigns and protests, such as the demonstrations against the war in Irak, the World Social Forum or the Jubilee 2000 initiative on debt relief.

These global policy networks empower state and non-state actors to join forces around clearly defined causes of public interest. Many of them make strategic use of the media and of the new information technologies.

Most of these strategic alliances were developed within the UN system itself. The Panel feels that these new forms of interaction are to be valued and extended.

Much can be done before formal agreements by governments are reached. Different actors are needed for different tasks. Innovative solutions can be tested and then scaled up.

We are therefore proposing to strengthen UN's convening role, its capacity to galvanize all constituencies and bring together different parties to tackle global problems.

We are endorsing the value of multi-stakeholder partnerships as a more flexible, decentralized and efficient way for achieving global goals.

These are voluntary and collaborative agreements to solve a complex question. All those with a stake in the problem should be included in the approach to solving it and the implementation of the solution.

We are recommending that priority should be put on interaction with civil society at the country level. It is unrealistic to think of democratic governance at the global level if there is not an enabling environment for citizen participation at the national level.

We are also suggesting a more systematic UN engagement of parliamentarians and local authorities. These non central-state actors cannot be considered as part of civil society. But they play a relevant role in connecting people and communities with the issues that affect them.

All of these proposals reflect the view that engaging with civil society is a necessity for the UN, not an option. This engagement is essential to help the organization identify global priorities and mobilize all available resources to deal with the task at hand.

We see this opening up of the UN to a plurality of constituencies and actors not as a threat to governments but rather as a powerful way to reinvigorate the intergovernmental process itself.

In this spirit, we have also addressed the sensitive question, often raised by governments, of civil society's representativity and integrity.

It is certain that consultation and partnership need to conform to mutually-agreed rules ensuring high standards of transparency and accountability on all parts.

New roles and rights always entail new responsibilities. NGOs have to address these questions in the same

way they have always urged governments and the private sector. In our report we are challenging them to develop their own rules of conduct and processes of self-organization.

On the other hand, we are reiterating that the source of civil society legitimacy is a very specific one. It does not come from an electoral mandate or a membership base.

The legitimacy of civil society organizations derives from what they do and not from whom they represent. Its power is a soft one. It is not the authority to decide or to enforce. It is the capacity to argue, to denounce, to propose, to experiment, to innovate, to be exemplary.

Civil society is not only diverse and multifaceted. It is also deeply divided on its political options and tactical approaches to several issues. This is not in itself a problem, insofar as democracy is, intrinsically, a conflictive space.

However, contrary to an often idealized self-image, civil society is not the realm of 'good values and intentions' in contrast to the logic of power ascribed to national states. Civic and community groups may also advocate for causes that are deeply controversial. In some instances, even incompatible with universally-accepted norms and principles.

Of much deeper concern are the dark sides and murky corners of what has been called the 'uncivil society'.

Global terrorism and the drug trade are potent expressions of the destructive power of non-state criminal networks. They have the capacity to inflict tremendous damage not only to specific countries but to the international order as a whole.

All this makes the debate about civil society's legitimacy a very complex one. Trust and recognition in this field are never attained once and for all. They can only be gained in the arena of public opinion and must be continually renewed.

I wish to conclude by reaffirming the significance of these cutting-edge network and partnership strategies in global policy-making. If unilateral action undermines multilateralism, it is also true that the broad participation of different actors and constituencies reshapes and strengthens it.

My sense is that there is no alternative to dialogue and negotiation in order to produce policies and rules of general acceptance.

The role of civil society and public opinion in creating a global public space for debate and deliberation is at the heart of contemporary democratic governance. It represents one of our best hopes to reenergize the process of building a cosmopolitan world order.