

The United Nations and Civil Society. Legitimizing Global Governance-Whose Voice?

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Synopsis

This book takes a deep look at how well the United Nations is performing in opening up to civil society actors who can help to defend its founding values in a rapidly changing world in which non-state players are impacting increasingly on what formerly were essentially intergovernmental processes.

The experience of civil society participation in the global governance of food and agriculture is used to ground the story. This is a persuasive case for several reasons. The World Food Summits hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) in 1996 and 2002 are the least documented of the UN international conferences of the past decade. Yet the issues they targeted play an exceedingly important role in the world policy arena. Food is a basic human need and a fundamental human right. Agriculture provides a livelihood for the majority of the world's population and is intimately related to environmental problems like climate change and the energy crisis. The geopolitical and corporate interests that revolve around these issues are enormous. Agriculture was the terrain on which the WTO Doha Round ground to a halt in late 2005. The food price surges of 2007 triggered off uprisings in cities around the world and, currently, a long overdue effort to revisit the global governance of this key sector. Not surprisingly, the World Food Summit and its follow-up have attracted the attention of organizations representing social movements of the South – rural movements in particular - which have been underrepresented in other summits. In the process, FAO has become the locus of a highly innovative experiment in UN–civil society relations, one which serves to illustrate some of the principles and practices on which more effective UN outreach to civil society could be based.

The book sets the food and agriculture case study in a broader context by reporting on UN system-wide research in which the author assesses the dynamics of change in civil society relations that the global summits of the '90s have helped to set in motion. In particular, she asks the following questions:

- To what degree has civil society-UN system interaction led to changes in development discourse within the UN system? How has it influenced the issues that find their way onto the global agenda, the way in which they are framed and, more profoundly, the paradigms on which agenda-setting is based?
- To what degree has this interaction brought about institutional change within the UN to accommodate civil society input into global policy debate and normative work? What new political spaces have opened up, for what kinds of civil society organizations? To what degree has the UN managed to reach out beyond the NGOs which are its principal civil society interlocutors and make contact with people's organizations and social movements?
- What efforts are being made, with what success, to build two-way links between global policy dialogue and action at the country level to implement global policy forum outcomes, and how is civil society being involved in this vital task?

The author concludes that, although the UN system has indeed opened up to civil society voices over the past decade, it has generally failed to move from episodic participation to meaningful involvement of civil society actors in global political process. The bases for such involvement are far more solid than they were 15 years ago, particularly in terms of the structures and capacities of social organizations directly representing the sectors of the population who are the object of the Millennium Development Goals. At the same time, the geopolitical and economic powers backing the neoliberal agenda that these civil society actors contest are just as present as ever on the global scene. The challenge before the UN is to provide a terrain—or, rather, a series of intercommunicating terrains—on which meaningful confrontation and negotiation can take place, as it did 60 years ago when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was crafted around a table fractured by the Cold War. The political context and the cast of actors have changed, but the significance of this role and the urgency of assuming it masterfully and authoritatively are unaltered. The book closes by suggesting what needs to be done and pointing to existing experience on which to build.

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About the author

Nora McKeon studied history at Harvard University and political science at the Sorbonne before joining the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. She held positions of increasing responsibility there, culminating in overall direction of the FAO's relations with civil society. She now divides her time between consulting, writing and lecturing on development discourse, peasant farmer movements and UN-civil society relations; and coordinating an exchange and advocacy programme for African and European farmers' organizations on agriculture and trade policy issues. Her recent publications include *Peasant Organizations in Theory and Practice* (with Michael Watts and Wendy Wolford, UNRISD 2004) and *Strengthening Dialogue with People's Movements: UN experience with small farmer platforms and Indigenous Peoples* (with Carol Kalafatic, UN NGLS forthcoming). She can be reached at nora.mckeeon@fastwebnet.it.