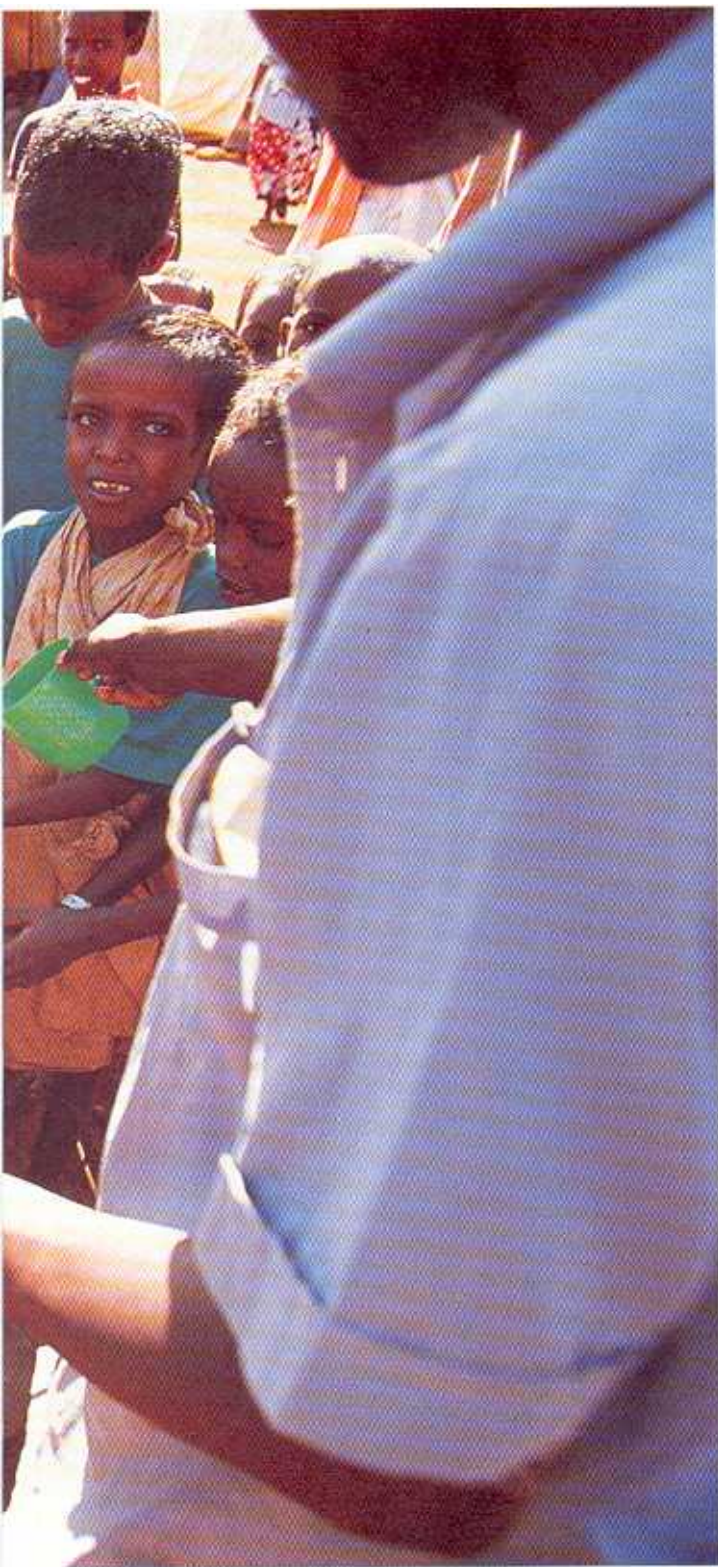


The NGO



*A growing number of emergency relief operations means the UN and NGOs must increasingly work hand-in-hand.
Children at a feeding centre in Somalia washing their hands.*

Perspective ~ a necessary voice



© Betty Press/Panos

- Popular organization
- International mobilization
- Coalitions and constituencies
- An essential dimension

When is an NGO not an NGO? When it is a UN agency.' This statement, made by some NGO representatives at the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, sums up the uneasy relationship between the UN and NGOs. The statement was in protest at the fact that some UN bodies had stalls at the NGO Forum being held parallel to the Cairo Conference.

The comment also demonstrates that while both the UN and NGOs agree that their relationship is ever-expanding, a lack of mutual trust and, in some cases, a lack of respect still remains. Some NGOs use every opportunity to criticize the UN system, especially regarding the body's peacekeeping efforts and the activities of the World Bank, while a few UN agencies in their turn have been sceptical about the effectiveness of non-governmental groups. In the *Human Development Report 1993* issued by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), for instance, the agency wondered whether NGOs have had as much success in tackling poverty as they claim. 'Nobody really knows', said the report. 'What seems clear is that even people helped by successful [NGO] projects still remain poor'.¹

The report added that NGOs reached less than 20 per cent of the 1.3 billion people living in absolute poverty and urged NGOs to engage more constructively with governments to avoid being marginalized in national debates on development.

Few NGOs, however, believe that they will ever gain the influence on or access to governments that

“the Earth Summit was a landmark in the UN-NGO relationship”

they would like to have. And what weight do they carry within the UN system itself? ‘NGOs have been a fundamental part of the UN machinery since the drafting of the UN Charter. But the early, informal rapport between the UN and NGOs has gradually evolved into a bureaucratic, inflexible relationship over the past decades’, according to Ann Doherty of Action for Solidarity, Environment, Equality and Development (ASEED).² Doherty said, however, that the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) – or Earth Summit – in Rio de Janeiro, was a ‘sharp break from this gradual erosion of access for NGOs’.

For its part, the UN believes that UN-NGO interactivity ‘abounds at all levels’. According to a 1994 report by the UN Secretary-General, ‘the contribution of NGOs has been significant in many areas of United Nations work’. The report said that the relationship had moved beyond the formal framework defined in the UN Charter and subsequent resolutions.

This view suggests the UN is at odds with Doherty’s assessment. But it supports the belief that the Earth Summit was a landmark in the UN-NGO relationship.

‘These institutions contributed to the shaping of the agenda, to the process of international mobilization around the concept of sustainable development, and to the building of the political commitments that made possible the adoption of the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, the conventions on climate change and the protection of biodiversity,

and the statement of principles on forests’, said the Secretary-General’s report.³

In fact, Chapter 27 of Agenda 21 speaks of NGOs in positively glowing terms, noting their ‘vital role’ in participatory democracy and their ‘experience, expertise and capacity’ in evolving sound development.

However, in 1993, at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the ‘bosom-buddiness’ of Rio dissolved into recriminations and criticism as NGOs were barred from monitoring closed sessions of the drafting committee that would draw up the final document of the conference. Some charged that the ‘erosion of access’ had begun again.

Despite such feelings, NGOs continue to work closely with many UN programmes and agencies, such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) with its UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service, the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and UNDP. The one UN body that some NGOs love to hate is the World Bank, but it too has clear operational rules for collaboration with NGOs.

Overall, the UN-NGO relationship has come a long way, with still much scope for closer cooperation.

Looking back

From the very start, the founding members of the UN recognized that NGOs existed and had an important role to play in the economic and social life of people, both on a national and international level. Thus, when the founding members drew up the UN Charter, they included a specific article devoted to formulating relations between the UN and such groups.

Article 71 of the Charter reads: 'The Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC] may make suitable arrangements for 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.'

The Charter was signed on 26 June 1945 and became effective on 24 October of the same year. At the time, many of the major NGOs of today (Amnesty International, Médecins Sans Frontières, World Vision International, Greenpeace) had not yet come into being, but there were enough active non-state organizations to merit the inclusion of an article devoted to the UN-NGO relationship.

A look at some of the organizations that pre-date the UN include, for example, Anti-Slavery International, founded in 1839; the Salvation Army, 1865; the American Red Cross, 1881; Wildlife Conservation International, 1897; the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers), 1917; Oeuvres Hospitalières Français de l'Ordre de Malte, 1927; Save the Children Federation, 1932; and the World Jewish Congress, formed in 1936 to fight Hitler's persecution of the Jews.

In the United States particularly, private voluntary organizations were many in number and quite influential. More than a hundred years before the signing of the UN Charter in San Francisco, the 19th-century French author and statesman Alexis de Tocqueville had noted that democracy in the new United States had been achieved partly because of the influence of voluntary organizations.



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An NGO water project in Bardera, Somalia.

Indeed, Article 71 of the UN Charter was included as 'a result of pressure brought to bear ... by representatives of NGOs on the United States delegation'.⁴ It had not been part of the original draft of the Charter. The NGOs had lobbied to be accorded consultation on political questions, and although they were given status only on economic and social issues, the article was still 'unprecedented in establishing formal relations between "interest groups" and an intergovernmental body'.⁵ These interest groups included a wide range of organizations who called themselves (and still do) a variety of names such as private voluntary organizations, voluntary agencies, or citizens' groups. But partly because of the UN Charter, 'NGO' is a term that has become widely accepted among the public.

The means of applying Article 71 were first defined in 1946 by ECOSOC in Resolution 3 (II), which 'provided for NGOs to be placed in consultative status with the Council and to hold consultations with the Secretariat'.

Both the UN and NGOs had a stake in co-operation following the Second World War. NGOs devoted to promoting peace and defending human rights saw the need to work with the new world body and its member states. In Caux, Switzerland, the Moral Re-Armament (MRA) movement played an important role in rebuilding relations between France and Germany after the war. This rapprochement helped to lead to the formation of the European Community.

In fact, just as the war gave rise to the UN, it also sparked the formation of other organizations, such as the Lutheran World Federation in 1947 and the World Council of Churches in 1948. Oxfam, currently one of the biggest international NGOs, was formed in 1942.

By the late 1940s there would be the international tension created by the Cold War, which also affected NGOs. 'For almost four decades, the

international evolution of the non-governmental sector was dominated by rivalries between the super-powers and their satellites.'⁶ But the UN too was dominated by such rivalries: in the 40 years after its formation, the veto was used some 400 times in the Security Council. Since the late 1980s, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the democratization process in Eastern Europe and the break-up of the Soviet Union, the veto has rarely been used.

Meanwhile, the NGO situation has changed as well. Now, instead of an East-West divide, there

are new challenges caused by ethnic conflicts and the growing tide of refugees in the world. A reflection of this is the fact that the Office of the UNHCR is one of the fastest growing UN agencies and the one that works most actively with NGOs. According to UNHCR information, NGOs carry out programmes on behalf of the agency to help refugees in many areas of the world. In 1993, there were more than 200 major NGOs working with UNHCR in the field.

The new challenges were highlighted in 1994 by at least one group of NGOs. At the 20th General Assembly of European Development NGOs held in April of that year, the main topic was the 'role, position and experience of NGOs on conflict, development and military intervention'. Among other issues, the conference examined the problems of NGO operations in war-torn countries such as the former Yugoslavia and Somalia, the need for post-conflict development and rehabilitation, and the role of the UN.

Apart from these concerns, another aspect of the post-Cold War situation is the emerging North-South division among NGOs along with increased competition for scarce funds. The North-South rift was in evidence during the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna as well as during the 1994 ICPD in Cairo. A cartoon by the Indian satirist, Ajit Ninan, aptly captured the situation when it showed NGOs on a make-believe winners' podium at the end of the conference. Among

“interest groups”

the 'first-place' finishers were smiling Northern NGOs, while Southern NGOs had to settle for third place. In Vienna, too, Southern organizations accused those from developed countries of trying to set the agenda.

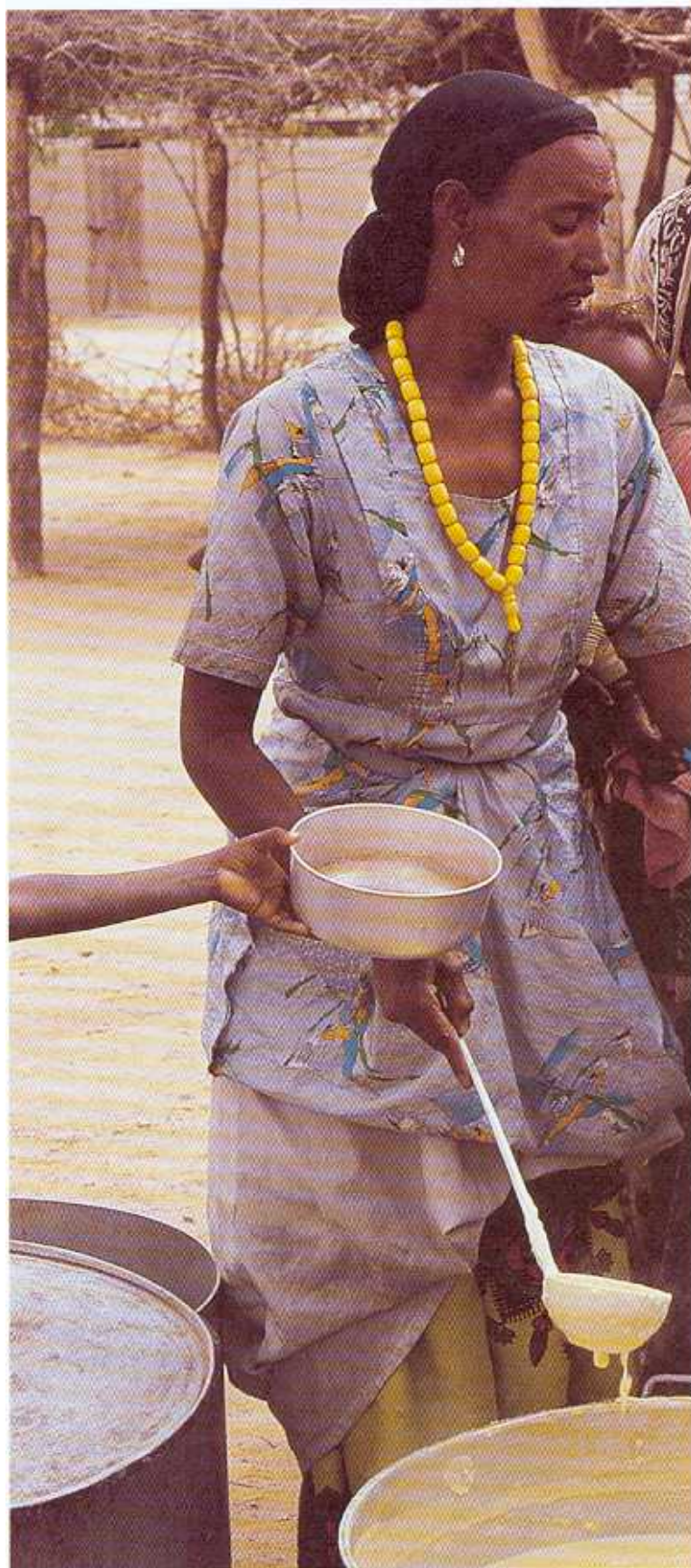
Yet, neither rifts nor the international political climate have prevented NGOs from working for greater access to the UN. In addition, NGOs themselves realize that they need more coordination among, and solidarity with, one another. Many have come together to form networking and liaison groups with one another as well as with governments.

According to the UN Secretary-General's 1994 report, NGOs' participation in the UN's decision-making systems and operational activity has 'far exceeded the original scope' of Article 71, primarily because of the enormous growth in NGO activities.

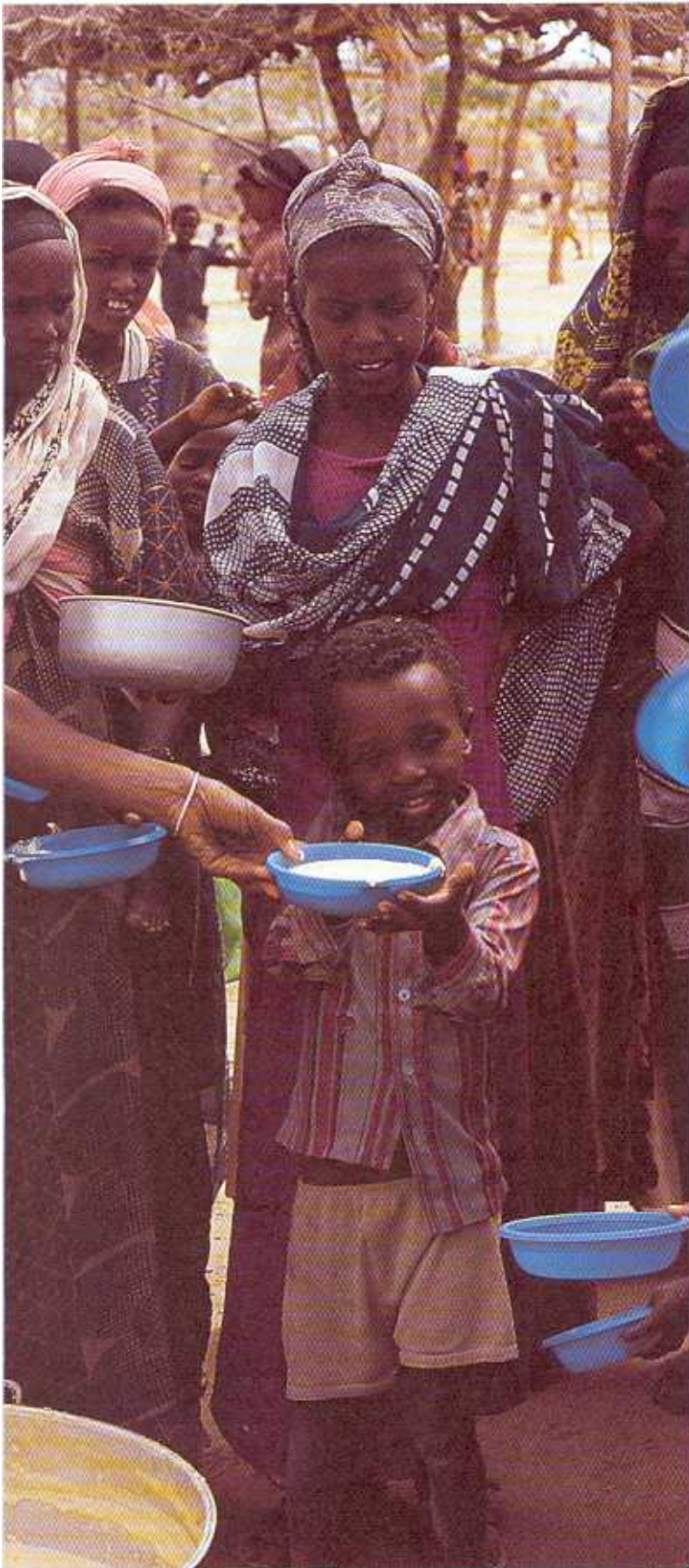
Today there are thousands of NGOs in the world, representing a myriad of concerns such as environmental protection, sustainable development, defence of human rights, promotion and defence of women's rights, children's welfare, family planning, poverty alleviation, humanitarian assistance and other areas. Some have grown out of a tradition of anti-government activity, some from religious movements, from weak government structures, from oppression or from conflicts such as the Second World War and the Vietnam War.

In Germany alone, there are an estimated 2,000 local and national NGOs working in development; and according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), northern development NGOs collectively spend about \$10 billion annually.⁷ In 1993, the 12-country European Community allocated some \$830 million to various NGO programmes, for emergency assistance, food aid and projects to help refugees and displaced people.

It is not only in the North that NGOs have been proliferating rapidly; many of the newer associations have been created in developing countries. In the South, the 'numbers of NGOs involved in development activities have increased spectacularly over the last decade. In some countries, with a particularly vibrant society, there are several tens of thousands of NGOs and people's organizations', says the UN Secretary-General's report.



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According to estimates by UNDP, the activities of both Northern and Southern NGOs reached some 250 million people in developing countries in 1993, more than double the number reached a decade before. Further expansion is being predicted as national and international events spur private citizens to take action.

'The activity of non-state actors has today become an essential dimension of public life at all levels and in all parts of the world. Examples abound to show the dramatic rise in people's capacity to organize among themselves and in the influence exerted by social movements in virtually all areas of concern to communities, large and small', says the Secretary-General's report.

NGOs
*are an
essential
dimension
of public
life*

NGOs still reach less than 20% of the 1.3 billion people living in absolute poverty.
A feeding programme for malnourished children in a Somali refugee camp.

Consultative status

In 1945, there were only 41 NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC; by 1993, that figure had risen to more than 1,500, according to UN figures.

The UN-NGO consultative arrangement is guided by ECOSOC Resolution 1296 of 23 May 1968 and covers various principles governing the relationship. The NGOs are divided into three categories. Category I includes the big international groups which are involved in activities relevant to the Council, which represent many people and have essential contributions to make in their economic and social life. Category II includes organizations which are internationally recognized for their competence within specific fields and Roster status may be granted to other groups which can make 'occasional and useful contributions' to the UN's work.

According to UN rules, Category I NGOs have the widest-ranging rights. They may place items on the provisional agenda of the Council and may propose items for the provisional agenda of subsidiary bodies. NGOs in both Categories I and II may have observers at the Council's public meetings and are entitled to submit written statements relevant to its work. They may also request to be heard by the Council. NGOs on the Roster may submit written statements. Some organizations that have consultative status include Amnesty International, Friends World Committee for Consultation, Human Rights Internet, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the American Association of Retired Persons, International League for Human Rights, Muslim World League, Service, Justice and Peace in Latin America, World Young Women's Christian Association, the Pan-Pacific and South-East Asia Women's Association, and Eurostep (a network group of 22 major development NGOs from 15 countries).

The activities of about 200 NGOs with consultative status are coordinated by the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGO),

which meets every three years for a General Conference and to elect a president and board members. CONGO works mainly to improve relations between NGOs and the UN and since 1974 it has sponsored several NGO forums alongside UN conferences.

For its part, ECOSOC can suspend or withdraw consultative status from NGOs under certain conditions, including if the 'organization clearly abuses its consultative status by systematically engaging in unsubstantiated or politically-motivated acts against Member States of the United Nations'.

This issue emerged at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, where the aspirations of the NGO community clashed with official decisions. The NGOs found themselves excluded from observing the vital drafting committee. Several were prevented from registering on the objection of governments and there was a running tussle about arrangements to discuss country-specific issues on the Conference premises.

*“NGOs
are
divided
into
three
categories”*

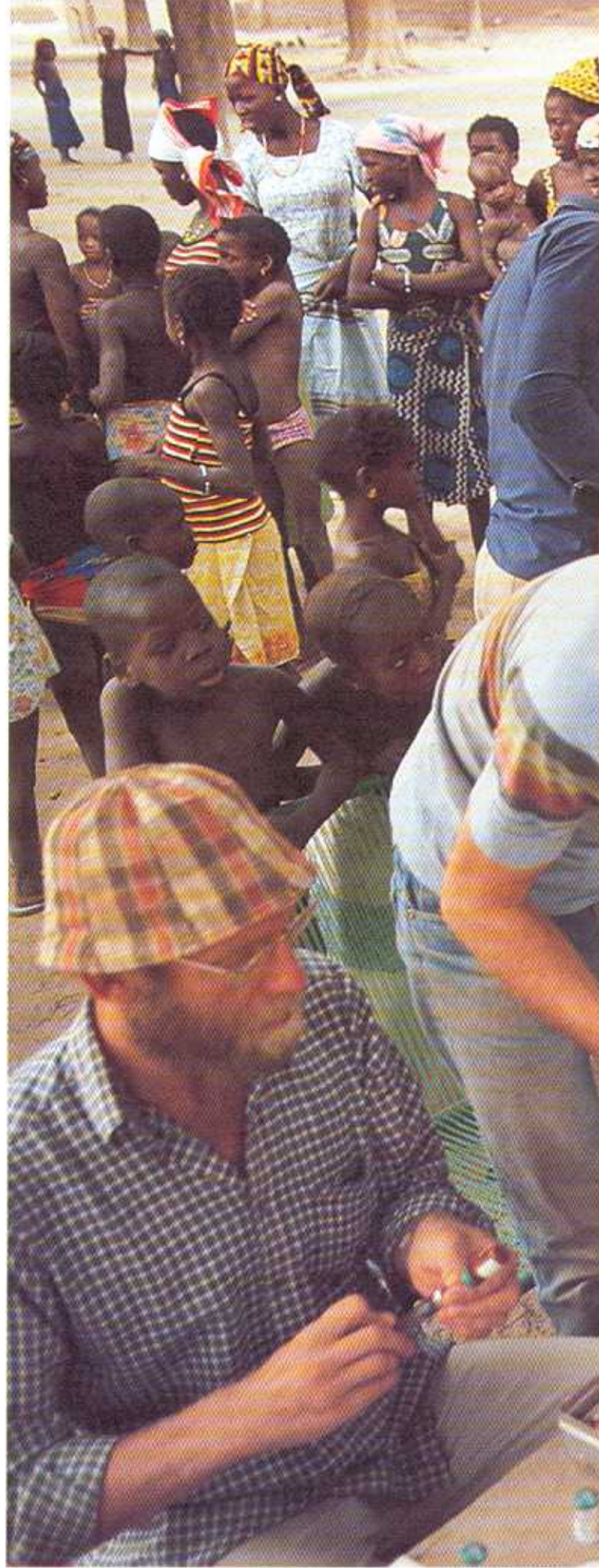
NGOs in Vienna were outspoken in other areas as well. They resented being excluded from the main sessions of the drafting committee working on the final document of the conference and they charged that the UN had not invited some NGOs because of their country-specific work. In all, there were more than 2,000 NGOs represented in Vienna, with about 200 having consultative status.

In Cairo, there were a similar number of NGOs present, accounting for 10,000 representatives altogether, and the issue was also one of access both to national governments and to the UN as a whole. These complaints continued despite the fact that some UN officials and government ministers made a point of addressing the NGO Forum, which was opened by Egypt's first lady, Suzanne Mubarak. When the conference was over, many NGOs doubted that they had had any significant effect on the contents of the final programme of action.

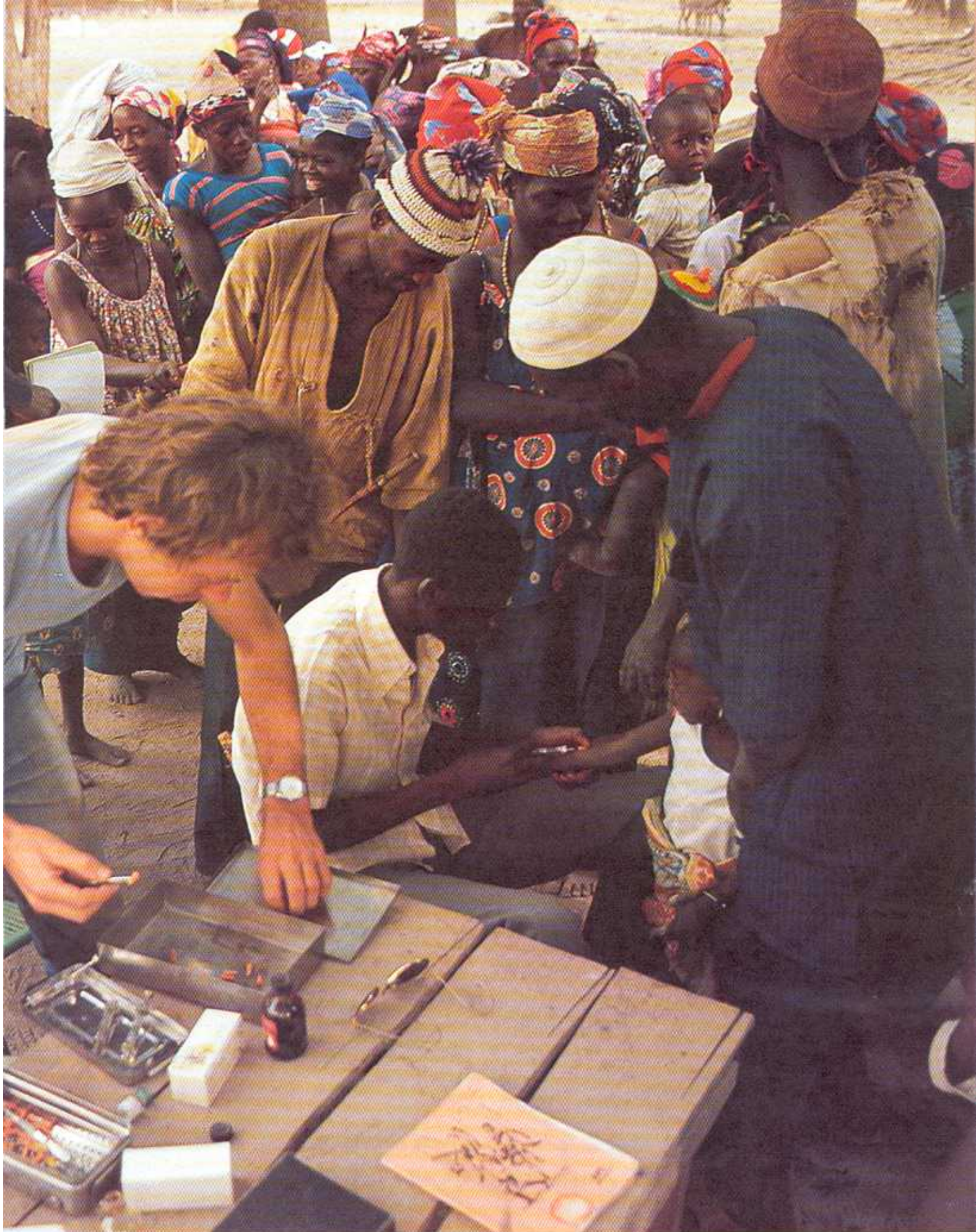
NGOs had lobbied for several issues that were not attained. Meanwhile, many Southern NGOs felt frustrated for other reasons, saying that the UN conference focused on the 'Northern agenda of population control' and overlooked development. This had to wait until the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in March 1995. The NGO Third World Network, for instance, said the issues that are important to developing countries, such as structural adjustment and debt-servicing problems, tended to be side-stepped during UN conferences. But the NGOs said they had learned many lessons from Rio, Vienna and Cairo, and planned to cooperate more closely and to speak with a united voice at future UN conferences.

Since Rio, many NGOs have been re-examining their roles and are now gearing up to influence reforms of the UN system. The UN is also reviewing its relationship with NGOs. In 1993, ECOSOC adopted a resolution calling for a 'general review' and update of current arrangements for consultation with NGOs.⁸

In July of the same year, another resolution was passed establishing an open-ended working group to carry out the review. Its first session, comprising six meetings, was held in New York from 20-23 June 1994, with 59 member states and more than



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*Only 10% of aid is spent on development assistance that affects the poorest people - health care and education, safe water and sanitation, and primary education.
An immunization programme in Mali.*

60 NGOs present. The activity of the working group, chaired by Ambassador Jamsheed K.A. Marker of Pakistan, was to be the most important in this area since 1968.

The review

The 1994 working group meeting in New York focused on several issues. This included a review of the categories of status for NGOs, an examination of consultative arrangements and accreditation to UN world conferences, and a look at the 'problems and bottlenecks' that NGOs face under the current arrangements. Participants also considered the experience of the Commission on Sustainable Development in working with NGOs.

The task of the working group was essentially seen as coming at a crucial moment, as the contribution of NGOs is critical at a time when the world body itself is searching for a more focused role in development and peace.⁹

Both member states and NGOs stressed that Resolution 1296 needed updating to allow more NGOs to participate in UN activities while 'retaining a reasonable filter to exclude' organizations whose objectives were 'incompatible' with those of the UN Charter.¹⁰

While Resolution 1296 is widely regarded as being in need of updating, it remains a viable basis for consultations between the UN and NGOs. Any revision, NGOs believe, should result in strengthening this relationship rather than curtailing the existing participatory rights of those organizations in consultative status.

NGOs are also worried about the trend of asking them to form 'coalitions' and 'constituencies' and to speak through a chairperson. Some feel this practice could destroy the diversity of views.¹¹ However, many at the UN believe that this could lead to greater efficiency.

A key area of concern for both NGOs and member states is the small number of Southern NGOs participating in UN activities. Some NGOs believe that a certain percentage of NGOs taking part in UN conferences should come from the South, while others reject the idea of a quota.

Overall, however, there was broad agreement that the UN should take steps to improve communication with NGOs, by fully using electronic communications facilities to provide the organizations with complete and up-to-date information on UN activities.

*“a key concern is
small number of
NGOs participating
UN activities”*

The future: 'warp and woof'

The review by ECOSOC of arrangements for consultations with NGOs started 25 years after the adoption of Resolution 1296 in May 1968. It came when NGOs had become a 'vibrant, living link in the warp and woof of human society', as Ambassador Marker put it. Whatever the outcome of the review, NGOs seem set to continue being this link and the UN has recognized that fact. In 1994, several UN agencies and programmes expressed their desire and plans to work more closely with NGOs.

At the ICPD in Cairo in September of that year, the Executive Director of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), Nafis Sadik, said the Fund hoped to work more widely with NGOs on national levels. She also stressed the role of NGOs in monitoring the actions of governments and charged them with the task of informing the public about the conference's programme of action.

At about the same time, Giorgio Giacomelli, Executive Director of the UN International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), gave credit to NGOs for their assistance to the UNDCP and the 'international community at large' in developing policies and programmes to tackle the problem of drug abuse. Giacomelli expressed firm UNDCP support for the NGO World Forum on Drug Demand Reduction that took place in Bangkok from 12-17 December 1994. 'This will be a major event in the UN Decade Against Drug Abuse', he wrote in an editorial.¹²

With such recognition, there seems great hope for a long and fruitful relationship between the UN and NGOs in the future. But the partnership, if it can be called that, will probably never be a completely smooth one, because the UN is an inter-governmental body and NGOs are, after all, NON-governmental organizations.



“a long and fruitful relationship”

***Communities are increasingly learning to help themselves.
A self-help construction community centre in São Paulo, Brazil.***



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Endnotes

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- 4 *Ibid*, p.11.
- 5 *Ibid*, p.11.
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- 8 *Terra Viva* newspaper, 11 June 1993, World Conference on Human Rights. Vienna, Austria, p.13.
- 9 *Ibid*. p.13.
- 10 Jan Reynders, *Report on the ICPD and the concurrent NGO Forum for the Liaison Committee of Development NGOs to the European Communities*, p.8.
- 11 *Go Between*, 47, Aug/Sept. 1994. Geneva, p.16.
- 12 ECOSOC Report A/94/215 - E/1994/99, 5 July 1994, p.10.