

Partnership in action

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Upstairs, Madonna's naughty lyrics echo through the coffee shop stereo system while oblivious state representatives eat their lunch and talk. Over the mealtime din, the international sex symbol urges an unseen suitor to 'spank me, spank me'.

One floor below, in Vienna's Austria Centre complex, hundreds of observers from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) sit mesmerized as women from every region tell agonizing first-hand testimonials of physical and sexual abuse, and of lives hampered by restrictive laws and customs.

Back upstairs, past armed guards, metal detectors and X-ray machines, government delegates barely glance at hundreds of photographs of themselves. The scenes are the same – men and women giving speeches or in conversation with fellow state representatives. They number over a thousand, perhaps two, yet their premises never feel crowded. If there is acrimony here, it is kept behind closed doors.

In the basement, on a floor known as U2, a teeming mass of almost 3,000 non-governmental representatives and workshop

participants squeeze past each other along corridors covered with horrific pictures of bloodied torture victims, the disappeared, and the poverty-stricken. Line-ups for registration, food and workshops are long and frustrating. These and other tensions spark numerous squabbles, many on full display during public plenary sessions.

For two weeks in Vienna in June 1993, this upstairs/downstairs World Conference on Human Rights continued its separate cadence. In the end, governments produced their worthy declaration; downstairs NGOs had gone through nothing less than a revolution.

To understand the import of Vienna for NGOs, one needs to return to the last UN International Conference on Human Rights held in Tehran from April 22 to May 13, 1968. The Iran event, the first worldwide government conference on human rights, was the centrepiece of the International Year for Human Rights. UN and other reports about Tehran mention no role for NGOs.

In Vienna in 1993, more than 2,400 NGOs gathered for two weeks in the same complex where the State meeting convened. The NGO activities were the culmination of two years of international organizing efforts. While NGOs were kept out of much of the State process, daily demonstrations and extensive, worldwide media coverage ensured few could forget that NGOs and the world were watching. 'We carried out our deliberations always conscious that they were there,' said one Western delegate.

While not on the same scale, two major NGO-driven events were held in 1968. Ad hoc committees – one in Geneva, the other in New York – were established to co-ordinate NGO activities.

The first effort was a conference in Geneva from January 29 to 31, 1968, to draft a common NGO position for submission to the States. In attendance were 146 participants representing 76 NGOs. Discussions focused on civil and political rights, social and economic rights, cultural rights, and implementation machinery. The conference unanimously adopted a set of conclusions for

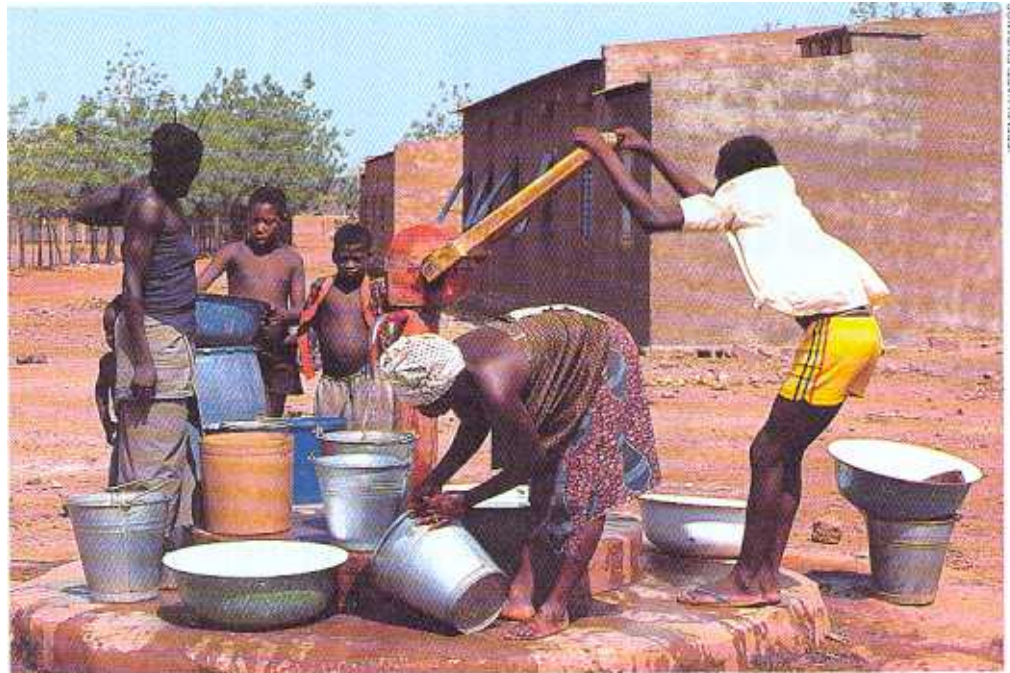
Courage and solidarity are the backbone of the world's growing human rights movement.

protests against the disappearance of her son



CHRIS STOWERS/PANOS

In Burkina Faso villagers use a hand-pump renovated by Oxfam. The first-hand experience of the NGOs who came to Vienna enriched the debate



JEREMY HARTLEY/PANOS

presentation in Tehran.

While some NGOs with consultative status would have attended the Tehran meeting as observers, it was four months before they responded officially. From September 16 to 20, 1968, a meeting of the NGO elite – those with consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) – was held in Paris. This time, 245 people from 127 NGOs participated. It was considered the largest gathering of its kind.

'NGO participation was active and constructive; above all, it was harmonious,' noted the December 1968 edition of the International Commission of Jurists' Bulletin.

Harmony and unanimity are not words that come easily to mind for anyone who attended NGO events at the World Conference in Austria in 1993.

In Vienna, NGOs met for a three-day forum before the State meeting convened to hammer out a joint position. As in 1968, there were working groups and final reports. That is where the comparison ends. After much heated debate, no agreement could be reached on how to handle the almost dozen reports. In the end, 11 separate documents, accompanied by a vague introduction and conclusion, were delivered to the States.

From that point, NGOs were to have focused on workshops and other events. But logistical problems and power struggles continued, the most public being disputes with UN officials over control of the NGO program, and an uproar over an invitation to former US president Jimmy Carter to address the forum. NGOs charged the Joint Planning Committee (JPC) with being too sympathetic to the UN after workshop titles were altered

because they were too sensitive, and announcements of other events, such as the Dalai Lama's visit, were cut from printed programs. With tensions already high, the JPC then rejected demands to remove Carter from the speakers' roster. Carter's efforts to be heard over hundreds of angry NGO demonstrators made news worldwide.

Some argue that such squabbles were the predictable result of the logistical nightmare of trying to organize more than 2,460 representatives of 1,365 NGOs, a 10-fold increase over the number involved in the human rights community 25 years earlier. It was unrealistic, they say, to assume such a diverse group could meet for the first time and emerge with a joint action plan.

Others argue that, while some blame rightfully belongs to logistics, the true cause of the dissension was nothing less than a revolt against the Geneva/New York NGO 'mafia' which has been running things for decades.

'I think it was a revolution by grassroots NGOs who came to Vienna energized and who believed that they were not represented by the people they saw in front of them,' says Reed Brody, director of the Washington-based Human Rights Law Group. The JPC then compounded the problem, he says, by failing to listen. 'The Jimmy Carter incident epitomized how far removed the JPC was from its purported constituency.'

NGO organizing efforts for Vienna began in the spring of 1992. The Vienna-based Ludwig Boltzmann Institute (BIM), a six-month-old documentation, research and information service, offered to serve as chief coordinator for NGO events, believing there would be less infighting if a non-NGO took

The protection, promotion and full enjoyment of human rights is one of the most important aspirations of today's world. Those of us who are committed to this goal are delighted to see it occupying a high priority on the international agenda. There is still a long way to go. But the magnitude of the task must never undermine the will of law-abiding nations, peoples and individuals. We must never forget that stronger and more effective international cooperation is of global importance. For this reason we placed our highest hopes in the World Conference on Human Rights, as it was a major step in the right direction.

H.E. Rafael Angel Calderón Fournier
President
Republic of Costa Rica

The Vienna Conference on Human Rights reaffirmed the universality of human rights and made the whole world aware of the need to ensure scrupulous respect for those rights. Côte d'Ivoire, which regards the right to life as the prime human right, takes the view that human rights cannot flourish against a background of poverty and deprivation. That is why we urge the international community to give active consideration to the economic position of countries facing large debt burdens, deteriorating environmental conditions and falling prices for raw material exports. This will help the world towards effective enjoyment of human rights.

**The late President
Felix Houphouët-Boigny
Republic of Côte d'Ivoire**

**Human rights activists
working in their local
communities have become
a powerful force for
social change – voluntary
community workers in
Ethiopia**



charge. It approached the Geneva-based International Service for Human Rights to act as an NGO counterpart.

The pair released one newsletter before the power struggles began. The New York and Geneva branches of the Conference on Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status (CONGO) argued that CONGO represented the community. By fall, a new group – the Joint Planning Committee (JPC) – was formed to oversee NGO activities. The JPC was made up of representatives of CONGO, BIM, and the Service.

Before long the JPC was also under attack. Several of the 60-plus NGOs who attended the final World Conference Preparatory Committee meeting in Geneva last February represented strong NGO caucuses which had emerged from regional World Conference meetings (Tunisia, Thailand and Costa Rica). They argued that the JPC did not represent them.

After a week of rancorous debate, the JPC agreed to include two representatives from each region, an indigenous delegate, plus someone from the women's caucus.

But even this was not enough. In Vienna, the regional caucuses – backed by hundreds of regional representatives – revolted. By the end of the forum, the JPC was stripped of all duties outside of ongoing administrative tasks and another body – the 30-member NGO Liaison Committee – was created to coordinate government lobbying efforts for the duration of the Conference. With few resources or time, the new group could barely keep abreast of government deliberations.

For many, the infighting was a sad end to what should have been the highlight of bringing the NGO community together and seriously hampered efforts to set a clear future agenda for NGOs.

Shelagh Day, Vice President of the Canadian Action Committee on the Status of Women, was part of the highly successful women's caucus. Day accepts that some problems were unavoidable. 'Because many have no money or resources, it is difficult to communicate with each other and there are few opportunities to work together,' says Day. 'These NGOs have never had a chance to think about what a concerted plan of action might look like.' And Vienna was not a total waste of time. Day and other NGOs say they gained new contacts and perspectives. 'It makes me think about what you can do to incorporate what you have learned here more effectively at home,' says Day. Still, she argues, the JPC could have done a better job of coordinating NGO lobby efforts throughout the four preparatory committee meetings leading to Vienna.

If something was lost, however, it was little compared to what was achieved, say others.

'What came out of Vienna are some very good caucuses – women, Asian, and Latin America in particular,' says Reed Brody, a member of the Liaison Committee. These groups still exist and will continue to have a serious impact on the human rights movement, he says.

'Vienna marked the confirmation of a broad, grassroots human rights movement,' says Brody. 'It was the regional groups which challenged the old power structure. Regional NGOs are now familiar with the major players in the international NGO community,' he says. 'It will now be easier for these people to connect without having to go through the JPC mafia. People know who everybody is and who the real revolutionaries are.'

And there may still be time to recoup lost ground. At the end of Vienna, the NGO Liaison Committee was given a further mandate to explore the feasibility of establishing a more fixed international NGO body. Perhaps, Brody suggests, such a new superstructure will become a communications arm for the caucuses.

Despite the problems, he says, NGOs know they had impact in Vienna. 'All the major ideas were propelled by NGOs,' he says, in particular, the women's rights as human rights lobby, the call for a High Commissioner for human rights, and an international penal court.

'While we have a long way to go before we can say the UN is serious (about human rights), NGOs were able to put the UN on the defensive; to force the UN to come up with responses which will hopefully have a ripple effect at the General Assembly, the Sub-Commission, etc,' says Brody.

'And now there is a new crop of leadership within the NGO movement, a whole new generation who have popular support.'