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 By John Foster

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## Civil Society Finally Gets A Hearing At The UN

### UN General Assembly makes global economy key theme of September Summit

As the UN celebrates 60 years, the General Assembly placed a marker in its long under-developed relations with civil society. It convened two days (June 23-24) of "informal interactive" sessions with representatives of NGOs, civil society organizations and private sector organizations. Their purpose was to elicit contributions to the preparation of the Summit General Assembly in September, as well as a response to NGO outrage at the almost total failure to find a way to integrate non-governmental groups in the GA sessions, even as observers.

Opened by Deputy-Secretary-General Louise Frechette and closed by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and chaired by GA President Jean Ping of Gabon, the sessions included more than two dozen carefully-selected key speakers, 200 participants who also had a chance to speak and several hundred observers. The meetings in the General Assembly and the ECOSOC chamber were packed, with enthusiastic applause greeting many of the NGO and some of the government interventions. Three Canadians were able to speak: Gauri Sreenivasan of the Canadian Council for International Cooperation, Zonnibel Woods of the International Women's Health Coalition and myself in the final session.

The concluding session which dealt with the UN reform agenda and more systematic issues ranged through the proposals in the Secretary-General's *In Larger Freedom* report and in the draft conclusions for the September General Assembly. The theme of the importance of reform, particularly in economic governance, was interwoven with frequent references to the need to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

My own brief intervention began with a call to note that behind the pressure for reform of UN structures was a growing demand for democratic representation and accountability among global institutions. Whether through interaction with civil society as many speakers had noted or through enhanced engagement with national parliamentarians, as for example in the global standing committees on key global challenges proposed by the recent panel of eminent persons headed by former Brazilian President Cardoso.

The urgent need to bring the international financial institutions (IFIs) and the World Trade Organization fully into the United Nations, into a more representative policy-making process, into more universal and transparent

accountability, and into the framework of UN norms in human rights, environment and other fields was repeated by a number of speakers with a variety of emphases. Further, the need to take the commitment of the Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development to enhance the participation of developing countries in the IFIs was cited, but governments were encouraged to embody this in reforms to voice, vote and quotas.

The need for a more effective body to coordinate economic, social and environmental policy, replacing the ECOSOC or being a reformed version of it, was cited, with several alternatives mentioned including an Economic, Social and Environmental "Security" Council or Global Council, an executive body of the ECOSOC or utilizing the General Committee of the General Assembly. The idea of an L-20, leader's group may be useful if brought clearly within the broader tent of the UN.

General and warm support was voiced for the Secretary-General's proposal for a Peace-Building Commission and slightly more guarded consideration for the Responsibility to Protect.

There was enthusiastic welcome for the profile given to human rights in the Secretary General's report and proposals. I emphasized that this was a matter of respect for norms as well as of structural change. We will not meet the challenge of the Millennium Development Goals and the scourge of HIV/AIDS in particular, if we do not assert the priority of the human right to health of all over the private privileged protection of intellectual property of a few corporate giants.

While the majority of speakers favored the proposed Human Rights Council, there was also limited but sharp opposition. A representative of an indigenous people's network cautioned against jettisoning the many elements of the current Commission structure which have offered means for the representation and concertation of native peoples as they see respect and recognition of their rights, of the investigatory and policy-development work of the Sub-Commission on Human Rights and of the various instruments and mechanisms of investigation, monitoring and reporting which have been developed by the Commission itself.

Near the conclusion of the session the representative of East Timor added a special note to the voices of German, Swedish, Mexican and other governments who had lauded the participation of civil society and urged a continuation of the format in future years. The Timorese stated that the very presence of his government at the General Assembly was due in good part to the support of human rights NGOs and the ongoing pressure of many civil society organizations on behalf of his people.

The session heard from many organizations, some familiar to Canadians like Amnesty International or the Baha'i Faith, as well as other groups better known in Africa, Asia or Latin America. Among speakers in the final session were Christiane Overkamp of CIDSE (whose Canadian member organization is known as Development and Peace), William Pace of the World Federalists, and Paul Tennessee, representing the International

Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the World Confederation of Labour.

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