Civil Society in United Nations Conferences

A Literature Review

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Acronyms

ACUNS	Academic Council on the United Nations System
CSD	Commission for Sustainable Development
CSO	civil society organization
DESA	Department of Economic and Social Affairs
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
HIV/AIDS	human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
IGO	intergovernmental organization
INGO	international non-governmental organization
NGLS	Non-governmental Liaison Service
NGO	non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PEPUN-CSR	Panel of Eminent Persons on UN–Civil Society Relations
SEPED	Social Development and Poverty Elimination Division
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNDPI	United Nations Department of Public Information
UNDSD	United Nations Division for Sustainable Development
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

Summary / Résumé / Resumen

Summary

This literature review is part of a broader United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) project exploring the interactions between civil society and the international system of governance. More specifically, the project seeks to evaluate the impact of various United Nations (UN) summits on civil society at local, national and global levels. Under this project, UNRISD has commissioned research in several countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In this paper, Constanza Tabbush reviews the current literature on the role of civil society at UN conferences, provides a first attempt under the UNRISD project to discuss the key concepts involved, assesses the scope of the literature on civil society engagement, and identifies some of the gaps that might usefully be addressed by further analysis. Tabbush takes three different sets of literature into account (i) to discuss the theory of civil society; (ii) to evaluate the engagement of civil society at global conferences; and (iii) to consider the role of civil society in global governance.

The 1990s saw the development of unprecedented links between global civil society and international conferences. As the conferences became an important feature in global governance, international activists came increasingly to see them as an opportunity to influence the global policy agenda. In turn, civil society was viewed by many international organizations as a valuable partner that would increase the latter's legitimacy and constituency; thus the UN system itself further encouraged the participation of civil society in global conferences.

Empirical studies that analyse the engagement of civil society with global conferences tend to overlook the transformations and new developments that civil society undergoes as it enters the world of international policy making. Studies are generally based on a unidirectional model that analyses the influence of civil society on the outcome of conferences but, although some indicators can be found, in general such studies do not consider the effects this participation can have on civil society itself. In this paper, therefore, Tabbush outlines some of the results of civil society involvement in global governance for developments within civil society. She proposes that future research be based on a model centred on the interaction or reciprocal effects of civil society and UN conferences.

This review also highlights the need for a systematic inclusion of theoretical considerations in empirical studies of this field. This could provide more solid grounding for the study of the consequences of civil society participation in UN conferences. The range of meanings of the term civil society should be recognized in order to challenge the assumption that participation is always beneficial. Tabbush considers different ways of conceptualizing state and non-state actors, as well as some key debates on civil society theory, and looks into the policy implications and empirical effects these can have on the ways civil society participates in global conferences.

At the time of writing in 2004, Constanza Tabbush was a Research Assistant at UNRISD, working on the themes of civil society and social movements, and gender and development.

This paper was initially prepared as a background document for the UNRISD research project on *UN World Summits and Civil Society Engagement*. The project is led by Kléber B. Ghimire, with assistance from Britta Sadoun, Constanza Tabbush, Anita Tombez and Jenny Vidal, and is funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation and the UNRISD core budget.

Résumé

Cette revue de la littérature fait partie d'un projet plus large de l'Institut de recherche des Nations Unies pour le développement social (UNRISD) qui étudie les interactions entre la société civile et le système international de gouvernance. Plus précisément, le projet cherche à évaluer l'impact des divers sommets des Nations Unies sur la société civile aux niveaux local, national et mondial. Dans le cadre de ce projet, l'UNRISD a commandé des recherches dans plusieurs pays d'Afrique, d'Asie et d'Amérique latine.

Constanza Tabbush examine ici la littérature consacrée au rôle de la société civile dans les conférences des Nations Unies, tente pour la première fois dans le cadre du projet de l'UNRISD de traiter des notions clés employées, évalue l'étendue de la littérature sur la participation de la société civile et relève certaines des lacunes que l'analyse pourrait utilement combler à l'avenir. Elle tient compte de trois différentes catégories de littérature i) pour traiter de la théorie de la société civile; ii) évaluer la participation de la société civile aux conférences mondiales; et iii) étudier le rôle de la société civile dans la gouvernance mondiale.

Les années 90 ont vu l'établissement de liens sans précédent entre la société civile mondiale et les conférences internationales. Celles-ci prenant une place importante dans la gouvernance mondiale, les militants internationaux en sont venus de plus en plus à voir en elles une occasion d'influer sur l'ordre du jour politique mondial. De son côté, la société civile est apparue aux yeux de nombreuses organisations internationales comme un partenaire valable, capable de renforcer leur légitimité et d'élargir leur public; c'est ainsi que le système des Nations Unies lui-même a encore encouragé la société civile à participer aux conférences mondiales.

Les études empiriques sur la participation de la société civile aux conférences mondiales tendent à laisser de côté les transformations et évolutions que subit la société civile lorsqu'elle entre dans le monde où s'élaborent les politiques internationales. Elles suivent généralement un modèle unidirectionnel: elles analysent l'influence de la société civile sur les résultats des conférences mais, malgré l'existence de certains indicateurs, ne s'interrogent généralement pas sur les effets que peut avoir cette participation sur la société civile elle-même. Dans ce document, C. Tabbush donne donc un aperçu de l'évolution qui s'est produite à l'intérieur de la société civile à la suite de la participation de celle-ci à la gouvernance mondiale. Elle propose que les recherches futures suivent un modèle centré sur l'interaction entre société civile et conférences de Nations Unies ou sur les effets que chacune a sur l'autre.

Cette revue de la littérature fait aussi apparaître la nécessité d'inclure systématiquement des considérations théoriques dans les études empiriques sur ce domaine, ce qui pourrait donner un soubassement plus solide à l'étude des conséquences de la participation de la société civile aux conférences des Nations Unies. Il faudrait reconnaître la multiplicité des sens que prend l'expression de "société civile" pour contester l'hypothèse selon laquelle sa participation serait toujours bénéfique. Constanza Tabbush examine divers concepts qui pourraient désigner acteurs étatiques et acteurs non étatiques, rend compte de débats essentiels sur la théorie de la société civile et approfondit les conséquences politiques et les effets empiriques qu'ils peuvent avoir sur la façon dont la société civile participe aux conférences mondiales.

Au moment de la rédaction, en 2004, Constanza Tabbush était assistante de recherche à l'UNRISD et travaillait sur les thèmes de la société civile et des mouvements sociaux, et du genre et du développement. Ce document était initialement un document d'information pour le projet *Les Sommets Mondiaux des Nations Unies et Participation de la Société Civile*. Ce projet est dirigé par Kléber B. Ghimire, avec l'assistance de Britta Sadoun, Constanza Tabbush, Anita Tombez et Jenny Vidal, et est financé par un don de la Fondation Ford et par le budget général de l'UNRISD.

Resumen

Esta revisión de la literatura forma parte de un proyecto más amplio del Instituto de Investigación de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo Social (UNRISD), cuyo objetivo es examinar las interacciones entre la sociedad civil y el sistema internacional de gobierno. Más específicamente, el proyecto pretende evaluar el impacto de varias cumbres de las Naciones Unidas en la sociedad civil, a nivel local, nacional y mundial. En el marco de este proyecto, UNRISD ha encargado la realización de estudios en varios países de África, Asia y Latinoamérica.

En este documento, Constanza Tabbush examina la literatura actual sobre el papel que desempeña la sociedad civil en las conferencias de las Naciones Unidas; analiza, por primera vez en el marco del proyecto de UNRISD, los conceptos clave relacionados; evalúa el alcance que han tenido estas obras en el compromiso de la sociedad civil, e identifica algunas diferencias que podría ser útil analizar en otros estudios. Tabbush tiene en cuenta tres grupos de literatura diferentes (i) para examinar la teoría de la sociedad civil; (ii) para evaluar la participación de la sociedad civil en conferencias mundiales y (iii) para tomar en consideración el papel que desempeña la sociedad civil en la gobernabilidad mundial.

En el decenio de 1990 se establecieron vínculos sin precedentes entre la sociedad civil mundial y las conferencias internacionales. A medida que las conferencias se convirtieron en una característica importante de la gobernabilidad mundial, los activistas internacionales las consideraron cada vez más como una oportunidad para influir en la agenda mundial de políticas. A su vez, muchas organizaciones internacionales entendieron que la sociedad civil era un socio valioso que aumentaría la legitimidad y circunscripción de aquellas, por lo que el propio sistema de las Naciones Unidas alentó más aún a la sociedad civil a tomar parte en las conferencias mundiales.

Los estudios empíricos que analizan el compromiso de la sociedad civil con las conferencias mundiales tienden a pasar por alto las transformaciones y los cambios que experimenta la sociedad civil a medida que va conociendo el ámbito de la formulación de políticas internacionales. Por lo general, los estudios se basan en un modelo unidireccional que analiza la influencia de la sociedad civil en los resultados de las conferencias, pero, aunque pueden hallarse algunos indicadores, estos estudios no suelen tener en cuenta los posibles efectos de esta participación en la sociedad civil misma. Por lo tanto, en este documento Tabbush resume algunos resultados de la participación de la sociedad civil en la gobernabilidad mundial para la introducción de cambios dentro de la sociedad civil. La autora propone que los futuros estudios se basen en un modelo centrado en la interacción, o en los efectos recíprocos de la sociedad civil y las conferencias de la ONU.

Esta revisión también destaca la necesidad de incluir sistemáticamente las consideraciones teóricas en los estudios empíricos realizados en este ámbito. Esto podría proporcionar una base más sólida para el estudio de las consecuencias que tiene la participación de la sociedad civil en las conferencias de la ONU. Deberían reconocerse los diversos significados del término "sociedad civil" para poner en tela de juicio el supuesto de que la participación siempre es beneficiosa. Tabbush toma en consideración diferentes formas de conceptualizar actores estatales y no estatales, y algunos debates clave sobre la teoría de la sociedad civil, y examina las consecuencias políticas y efectos empíricos que éstos pueden tener en las formas en que la sociedad civil participa en las conferencias mundiales.

Cuando escribió este documento, en 2004, Constanza Tabbush era Asistente de Investigación en UNRISD, y su labor estaba orientada al estudio de los temas sobre la sociedad civil y los movimientos sociales; al igual que la distinción por género y el desarrollo. Este documento se elaboró originalmente como documento de información para el proyecto de investigación de UNRISD sobre *Las cumbres mundiales de las Naciones Unidas y el compromiso de la sociedad civil*. Este proyecto ha sido coordinado por Kléber B. Ghimire, con la ayuda de Britta Sadoun, Constanza Tabbush, Anita Tombez y Jenny Vidal, y ha sido financiado con una donación de la Fundación Ford y el presupuesto de operaciones de UNRISD.

Introduction

Traditionally, within the United Nations (UN) system, civil society has been present mainly during operational activities at a national or global level. More contemporarily, civil society has gained an advocacy role that shapes its participation in consultations as the legitimate "voice of unrepresented populations" in UN forums and world conferences. This role has impacted international decision-making processes and influenced government decisions. Civil society generally acts as a source of expert information, consultation and, in some cases, as stakeholder of decision-making processes.[1]

In recent years, there has been an unprecedented growth of transnational links between civil actors. Their subsequent impact on international politics has made them an emerging subject of current intellectual debates. Advocacy efforts strengthened in the 1970s (Clark 1991) and evolved during the 1980s (Clark 1992) until the 1990s when they were intertwined with participation at major UN conferences (I. Anderson 2000). The past decade has been the most intense period of engagement between civil society and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). A wave of UN conferences provided civil society with a unique opportunity to participate in global governance, as conferences represent a new form of addressing global problems where different points of view struggle for legitimacy in articulating a consensus. Moreover, civil society enhanced its role at the negotiating table, while at the same time IGOs attempted to regain legitimacy for their decisions by increasing the presence of civil society in global forums.

Although the UN remains a state-based system of international negotiation, the growth of powerful non-state actors has placed a greater demand on the UN to accommodate their interests and improve collaboration with them. These developments point to a new, strengthened role for civil society in global governance. Nonetheless, the way in which this state-based system would be able to integrate non-state actors is an arena of highly contested debate. Therefore, the conceptual analysis and its implications for policies directed toward participation of civil society becomes all the more imperative.

This paper reviews the current literature on the role of civil society at UN conferences. The objectives of this paper are (i) to examine the terms *civil society* and *UN conferences*, including their definitions and linkages; (ii) to analyse the models and ideologies that shape participation of civil society in summits and influence the research done in this field; and (iii) to identify gaps for further study. The first section explores the links between the growth of international civil society and the role UN–sponsored conferences acquired as a regular site for global policy debates. The second section reviews the empirical research on the relationship between UN conferences and civil society, and considers the effects civil society had on the outcomes of conferences as well as the changes this produced on global activism. And in the third section, the main paradigms of international relations and some theoretical discussions that constitute the current debate on civil society are analysed in order to understand the diverse usages of the idea of civil society within UN decision-making processes. Finally, the conclusion outlines some gaps in current research and suggests future directions.

[1] For instance, four representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) serve on the board of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) (UNDPI 2003).

The Growth of International Civil Society and UN Conferences during the 1990s

Civil society is a concept historically related to Western history and political philosophy (Kaldor 1999). Debates on civil society were open to new discussions in the 1980s, where democratization efforts in Eastern Europe and Latin America revived the concept by utilizing it as a tool for their democratic struggles (Kaldor 1999; Cohen and Arato 1994). Civil society refers to the non-economic and non-state space of social interaction (Anheier et al. 2001; Kaldor 2003) that seeks to articulate values and represent their interests (Lenzen 2002). However, civil society should not be strictly equated with all social life outside the state bureaucracy and economic processes. Civil society channels its demands through political society (political parties and organizations), economic society (production and distribution organizations, usually firms or partnerships), cultural society and the media. So, its raison d'être is to voice demands to the state and the market. It is not directly related to the control or conquest of power, but to the generation of influence through democratic associations and debates in the public sphere (Cohen and Arato 1994).

The 1990s witnessed an extravagant growth of international civil society, "from about 13,000 international non-governmental organizations [INGOs] in 1981 to over 47,000 by 2001" (Anheier and Themudo 2002:194), mainly due to its linkages to globalization. The increase in capital, technology and trade flows, coupled with the subsequent interconnectedness between states, made this explosion possible (Kaldor 2000; Anheier et al. 2001). The international connections among segments of civil society were focused on attempting to influence the policies of governments and international organizations (Clark 2003). They found the processes of global conferences a fertile ground to achieve this because throughout the 1990s they became a new form of global governance.

One of the main causes of the sudden increase in UN conferences was the need to deal with problems that cannot be treated purely from a national perspective (Fomerand 1996). For example, environmental issues traverse national or regional boundaries and, as a result, nations have to address them jointly. The universality of the issues being dealt with makes previous forms of cooperation inadequate and requires other forms of negotiation (Reinato 1999; Schechter 2001). In other words, global problems therefore need global solutions. In addition, there were a variety of factors that shaped the predominance of UN conferences during the 1990s. The end of the Cold War opened possibilities for cooperation between states, and globalization was a primary force in leading nations to identify problems that extend beyond their territories (Lenzen 2002; Schechter 2001). Combined, these have had some level of success in catapulting almost all recent changes in international relations. Perhaps most directly linked to the emergence of global conferences is the mobilization of certain groups within civil society into a position to command public attention and demand action on specific global issues. For instance, the environmental and women's movements had significant roles in building momentum for the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio in 1992, the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Probably the most salient example is the key role played by the coalition of INGOs in the campaign to ban landmines: putting the landmine issue on the international agenda, getting like-minded governments and UN institutions on board, and creating the Ottawa Convention Banning Landmines, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 (K. Anderson 2000).

In general terms, UN conferences express the debates and dilemmas surrounding global problems and the responses of states and bureaucrats favouring or opposing a particular solution. Fomerand (1996) defines UN conferences as "political events par excellence", while Willetts (1989) goes as far as defining them as a new phenomenon in international diplomacy. Considering their salience and political role, these conferences provide an arena for the struggle for legitimacy between different claims within the processes of structuring a response—or lack of it—to international issues. The World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 saw two competing claims battle for legitimacy: "There was a fundamental disjuncture between governments that wanted to strengthen UN human rights procedures and governments that wanted to deal them a death blow" (Gaer 1996:58). Accordingly, the key function of global

conferences is to provide a source of legitimization; to seal the approval or disapproval of claims, policies and actions of participants (Fomerand 1996).

Box 1: History of engagement between the UN and civil society

The legal structure of NGOs and UN relations is based on article 71 of the UN Charter that empowers the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are concerned with matters within its competence. Historically speaking, while some scholars argue that the Charter formalizes the relationship between NGOs and the UN in a significantly positive way (Van Rooy 1997), others suggest it only codifies the custom of NGO participation, meaning that the opportunities offered were no better than those afforded to NGOs in the early years of the League of Nations (Charnovitz 1997). Nevertheless, nobody could contest the fact that "NGOs are more prominent on the international stage today than they were 20 years ago…the transformation of the NGO community from outsiders-looking-in to stakeholders has been dramatic" (Van Rooy 1997:104).

The involvement of NGOs in international policy has had a cyclical pattern. Some authors explain the changes in this relationship in terms of governments' attitudes toward civil society (NGLS 2003). According to Charnovitz (1997), this pattern varies according to political supply and demand: the needs of governments and international bureaucracies, and the capability of civil society organizations (CSOs) to satisfy them. These two views point at essential determinants of this relationship but fail to take into account the pressure CSOs can put on states. Following the latter metaphor, civil society can also influence governments and IGOs to increase their political demand.

Historical periods of CSOs identified by Charnovitz

Emergence	1775–1918
Engagement	1919–1934
Disengagement	1935–1944
Formalization	1945–1949
Underachievement	1950–1971
Intensification	1972–1991
Empowerment	1992

Source: Charnovitz (1997)

During the 1950s and 1960s, civil society's activities in the UN were tainted by Cold War politics, ideological mistrust and institutional weaknesses on the part of ECOSOC. Due to these political dynamics, the interaction could be characterized as underachieved. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed growth in the number and size of CSOs. Civil society proliferated throughout the system, having a positive impact on issues regarding the environment and human rights. During this period, the UN General Assembly started calling upon civil society to assist in the planning of international conferences. Authors concur in identifying the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development as the turning point in civil society's participation, where their numbers and impact on the final document—Agenda 21—were unprecedented, hence opening the doors for the UN conferences of the 1990s (Charnovitz 1997).

Not surprisingly, from 1993 to 1996, consultation arrangements with ECOSOC were reviewed in order to update the framework established in 1968. Two changes should be noted as expanding civil society's role in international forums: (i) national, regional and subregional NGOs could now seek accreditation; and (ii) ECOSOC aimed at creating a just and balanced involvement of organizations from all regions of the world (Alger 2002). Consequently, in the 1990s the picture changed dramatically, with a spectacular growth in the number of organizations playing a part in global decision making. NGOs are now involved in levels previously unimaginable, from the delivery of humanitarian relief to policy advice on global environmental management (Krut 1997). Proposals have been made to further enhance the role of civil society and to provide further access to the General Assembly and the Security Council. Changes are also envisaged for access and accreditation processes as they have become overpoliticized, expensive and might present a barrier, especially for developing country CSOs. The panel that reviews civil society and UN relations proposed combining all existing UN accreditation processes into a single mechanism under the authority of the General Assembly and also decreasing the prominence of intergovernmental review, which tends to overpoliticize the accreditation process (PEPUN-CSR 2004:11).

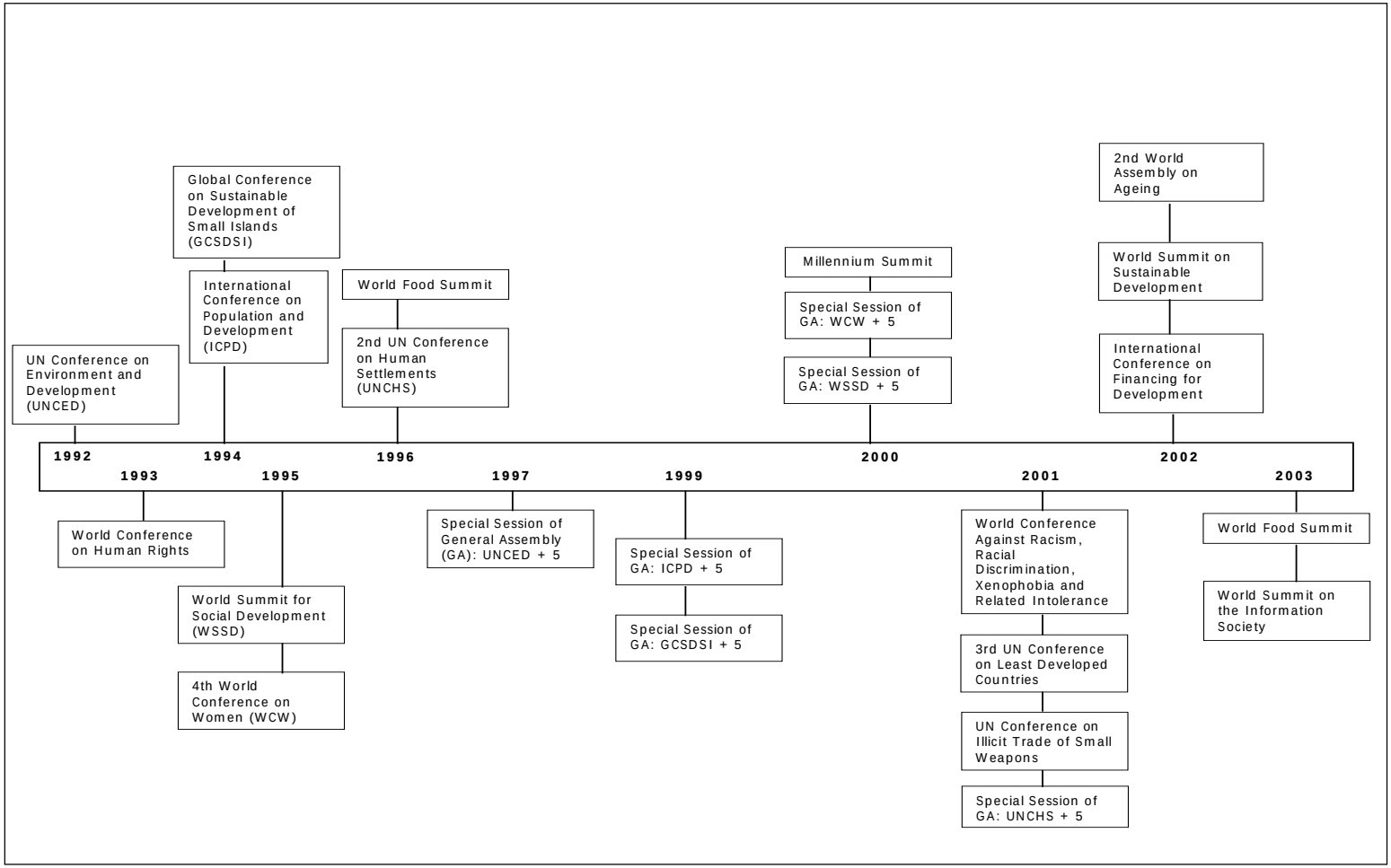
In spite of these positive developments, the most ironic aspect of the enhancement of global civil society's influence is that it has been achieved at a time when the UN's role is highly questioned. Krut (1997:37) asserts, "It must be frustrating for NGOs, having spent so long working to get onto the playing field of global governance, to find the goal-posts have moved to a new economic arena".

This role acquired a new dimension throughout the 1990s because although global conferences were not new, what distinguishes the 1990s—with respect to the 1970s and 1980s—is not their size, number and publicity but that the conferences acquired regularity and become a part of global governance processes. Throughout this period there was a succession of conferences for the purpose of constructing agreements and common objectives within the international community. The majority of them took place during the beginning of the 1990s and just after 2000 (see figure 1). Generally, the issues raised by these conferences are related to international development debates; themes like human rights, the environment, women's rights, racism, social and sustainable development, ageing and new technologies have been dealt with by these conferences. Furthermore, the conferences can be divided into two analytical categories according to the purpose of their negotiations. Some are "standard-setting" conferences with the goal of defining and endorsing standards of behaviour for governments, and not intended to feed directly into programmes or operations. And others could be called "operational" since they intend to guide a range of practical activities, most commonly setting up a new international organization or changing established ones, as well as allocating financial and other resources (Taylor 1989).[2] The conference process includes preparatory meetings on regional and thematic areas, the main conferences, and follow-up processes ("Plus 5s" and "Plus 10s") on a topic of concern. The objectives of the main conference are for all attending states to reach agreement on the issue of concern and to develop a preamble and a plan of action, which, although non-binding, can have a strong moral and political value. Agenda 21, the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development are examples of declarations that have had great impact on the international agenda in the 1990s. The Plus 5s and Plus 10s should ideally monitor the realization of the commitments made in these declarations, though sometimes they also involve some renegotiation of commitments.

The regularity and active role of UN conferences in global governance make them attractive for civil society since they provide a spot for influencing global policy debates. International organizations also view civil society as an attractive partner as it could further enhance their legitimacy and encourage public and political constituencies to support them (Edwards and Gaventa 2004). In fact, international organizations attempt to regain some of their legitimacy by bringing CSOs into global governance (Foster 1999). Civil society is seen as the holder of the moral authority for action and operational knowledge, or what Chandhoke (2002) calls "the peculiar hallmark of ethical political intervention: moral authority and legitimacy". Civil society claims to truly represent general interest in opposition to official or power-driven interests of the state or of the economy. And it is this claim—independently of its veracity—that makes them an attractive new partner in global forums.

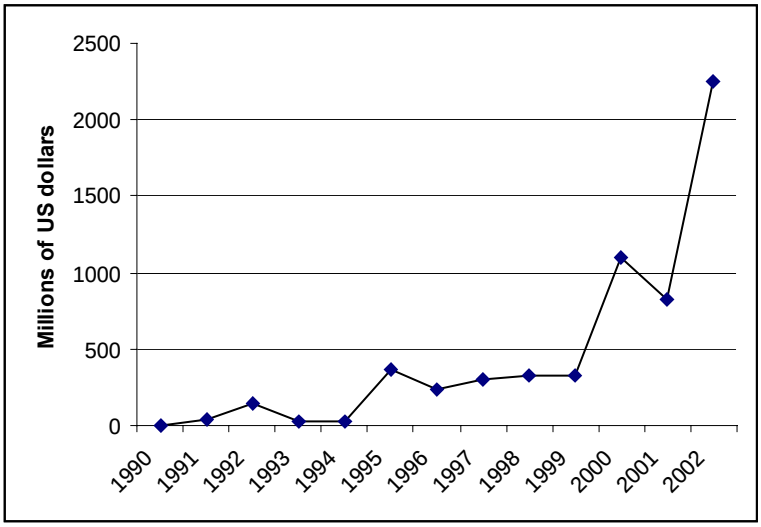
[2] For example, the conferences on environment and development express this diversity. While, on the one hand, the outcome of Rio 1992 was a standard-setting document, Agenda 21, on the other hand, Johannesburg 2002 could be described as an operational conference giving rise to a plan of implementation that will commit countries to targets, timetables and resource contributions in order to achieve Agenda 21 (Gutman 2003).

Figure 1: Major UN summits from 1992 to 2003



Furthermore, many of the UN processes of the 1990s were informed by the academic discussions concerning the rights-based approach to development and the topic of participation[3] that argued in favour of enlarging the capacity of excluded groups to make claims on the state and the international system (Stiefel and Wolfe 1994). Another interconnected theoretical debate that fuelled an open attitude toward civil society in UN conferences was the idea of civil society as civility; as the representative of excluded groups, which established civil society as an instrument for harnessing democracy (Van Rooy 1998). These discussions facilitated the opening up of UN processes to the participation of civil society. Moreover, the mobilization and activism of these movements around issues of international concern reinforced their role as an actor in the international policy arena. Civil society is seen as one of the prime movers on issues of gender, climate change, debt, landmines and HIV/AIDS, to name some, and among those that take the first step in provoking global policy debates (PEPUN-CSR 2004). A renewed interest of governments and aid agencies reinforced the opportunities to do so. This is reflected in the steady increase in funding from the mid-1990s to the beginning of 2000, the period with an intense concentration of global conferences (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Official development assistance to support NGOs, 1990–2002



As a result, one feature of the global conferences of the 1990s was their unprecedented encouragement of the participation of CSOs.[4] Civil society found fertile ground in UN conferences for advocacy efforts because they provided a chance to pressure states and raise consciousness for relevant issues. Civil society needed to influence IGOs' policies and programmes because some local problems emanate from decisions made at the international policy level or because crises, though not international in nature, are able to attract international attention. They also provide the opportunity to influence national governments in order to alter their policies. This was also reinforced by some donor and UN agencies increasing their funds for civil society's participation in UN conferences; in the case of Southern NGOs, access to resources drove them to seek relationships with UN summits (Uvin 1996). Furthermore, civil society saw a unique opportunity to access the international media and put forward ideas in dramatic ways (Chandhoke 2002). The conferences were also viewed as occasions to discuss

[3] Participation is "the organised efforts to increase control over resources and regulatory institutions in given social situations, on the part of groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from that control" (Stiefel and Wolfe 1994:5).

[4] Accurate numbers are difficult to trace, as some analyses consider a unit of measurement the number of people who attended, while others consider the number of organizations represented; studies either count the number of people registered or the ones that actually attended the meeting. Because of these differences, numbers vary from one source to another. For instance, concerning the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban in 2001, some sources stated that 3,000 individuals participated; others maintained that 6,000, 7,000 or 8,000 attended the conference (Sadoun 2004). What is certain, however, is that the participation of civil society was a critical feature in the creation and development of these global events.

future strategies with other CSOs, since summits supplied a space for networking among civil society itself. The success of women's organizations at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna showed the outcomes of creating a strong coalition with a clear definition of matters of concern and coordinated joint action (Martens 2000). Indeed, it seems that civil society, or at least parts of it, had an opportunity to exert influence at a global level, to gain visibility and to access funding for this purpose.

Notwithstanding all these developments, it is still unclear how the relationship between conferences and civil society might evolve in the future. Since the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, many civil society activists are becoming increasingly disenchanted with UN summits. They have realized that UN involvement is long term, expensive in terms of resources, slow-paced and even questionably effective (Van Rooy 1997). The actual effectiveness of global conferences has been subject to public scrutiny and debate. There is a wide diversity of opinions both "for" and "against" that illustrate the lack of clarity as to conference outcomes. Their usefulness is questioned by raising issues related to expenses, concern of work duplication, diversion of attention from other serious issues, lack of tangible agreements, backtracking on previous agreements, pre-emption of more radical solutions resulting in compromise rather than commitment, and the imposition of a world order favouring values of a few powerful countries. Whereas the opposite point of view highlights that conferences mobilize national and local actors to take action on major global problems, set international standards for national policy where governments make commitments and report regularly to the UN, provide an opportunity to think globally, and finally have an explicitly normative function (Fomerand 1996; Schechter 2001). This debate shows that the effectiveness of conferences differs, depending on various factors ranging from the type of issues being addressed at the conference, to the reaction of government delegations to them, to the foreign policy context of the conference. Recent reviews of UN–civil society relations propose reforms to the way issues are debated in the global policy arena (PEPUN-CSR 2004). They suggest that the big global conferences characteristic of the 1990s should still play an important role but must be used sparingly to establish global norms; whereas more modest public hearings—such as interactive high-level roundtables, multistakeholder partnerships and multistakeholder hearings—could provide more appropriate forums for reviewing and implementing progress on agreed global goals. This implies many emerging challenges for civil society groups, which need to evaluate the results of this decade of engagement, as well as the new institutional framework, to design their future strategies.

Studies on UN Conferences and Civil Society Relations

This section discusses the current literature on the interaction between UN conferences and civil society. It draws attention to the main findings of empirical research and their subsequent limitations.

Studies on civil society's role in UN conferences usually provide broader definitions of civil society than that of NGOs though, once the concept is operationalized, it is generally reduced to the NGO sector. Furthermore, "UN conference" relates generally to the main global meetings. Authors argue that, for instance, Plus-5 conferences face some fundamental differences compared to main conferences that justify a longitudinal view (Chiriboga 2002). Thus, the existing information provides a picture of the interactions that occur in the major conferences, but do not provide a longitudinal analysis of the different institutional settings and their effects on the behaviour of civil society.

Overall, the existing literature focuses on assessing the influence of NGOs in global social policy making so as to analyse their impact at UN summits. Three channels of influence can be identified: (i) consultations, information and lobbying; (ii) surveillance; and (iii) policy making and decision-making (Weiss 1999). Studies generally concentrate on the first type of influence, as it is the first and most common way that NGOs affect the global policy agenda; thus this

section focuses mainly on that aspect of engagement. This approach has contributed to the understanding of the role and scope of non-state actors in global decision-making processes. The literature provides useful descriptions and analyses of successful and failed attempts to influence international policy making. Hence, generally empirical studies end up providing a variety of classifications in an attempt to arrange this complexity into some sort of order. For example, common outputs of research are: lists of roles of NGOs in UN conferences[5], different forms of participation of NGOs[6], schemes of different influencing strategies used by NGOs at UN conferences[7], and even categories to analyse the relationship between civil society and the international system[8].

In addition, the literature provides evidence of the highly uneven nature of the relationship between civil society and international decision-making processes. Ritchie (1996) argues that relationships between NGOs and the UN vary from distant and indirect, as in the case of grassroots organizations, to virtual equality in some human rights or health areas where their participation as executing agencies is eagerly sought by IGOs, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees[9] or UNAIDS. Therefore, the interaction between civil society and IGOs is depicted as a one-dimensional effect of the former over the latter.

As noted previously, much of the literature refers to the first category of influence and describes and analyses the types of NGO strategies that are utilized to influence government delegations, the appropriate opportunities to influence policy, and the context that facilitates the success of that strategy. In relation to the type of influence, authors concur that civil society's influence is moving beyond formal diplomatic relations (Donini 1996), and that informal relations may exert the same influence as a consultative status (Gordenker and Weiss 1996b), due to the fact that the outside world has been changing much faster than the official rulebooks (Donini 1996). As a result, informal links between like-minded people with the same convictions, goals and interests create webs of connections. By contrast, some authors claim that at UNCED, the most important vehicle of influence was the relative success of NGOs in taking part in national delegations (Conca 1996). Yet it is also noted that participating in government delegations might require toning down criticism at home and losing some independence (Conca 1996). While informality provides further access, it can also be altered without notice. "The informality of arrangements at the CSD[10] allows greater advancements in practice, but also brings the risk that these advancements may be revoked any time" (Howell 1999:34).

Regarding suitable opportunities to influence policy during the conference cycle, there is wide agreement that most of the input that civil society could provide occurs before the conference officially opens; the most effective time to exert influence being during the national and PrepCom (preparation committee) processes (Willetts 1989; Chen 1996).

Finally, studies show that the context of conferences can either hinder or enhance the influence of CSOs. Two issues should be highlighted: the type of conference and the attitude of governments. The most propitious types of conferences that civil society can influence are those that address a topic that is highly salient to public opinion[11] but is a low policy issue[12], for

[5] For instance, McDouglas et al.—cited by Charnovitz (1997)—divide the activities of NGOs into seven decisive functions, namely: intelligence, promotion, prescription, invocation, application, termination and appraising. Moreover, their roles in international cooperation are divided into operational or education and advocacy roles (Gordenker and Weiss 1996a).

[6] Uvin (1996) creates a typology of participation in the international regime divided into five areas: consultative/informative, surveillance/control, implementation/management, decision making/policy making, and lobbying.

[7] Some typologies scrutinize the specific tactics used by civil society within the international system. We learned that women's movements utilized a diversity of strategies: in Rio they created a women's congress and a women's caucus, while in Vienna they used global campaigns, a women's caucus and a global tribunal (Chen 1996).

[8] For example, Van Rooy (1997:93–114) splits their relationships into six main aspects: identity of the players involved, the main issues under debate, the resources available, the decision-making channels, NGO publicity efforts, and the lobbying tactics undertaken to influence governments.

[9] For example, the Partners in Action Initiative.

[10] Commission for Sustainable Development, a follow up mechanism created during the 1992 Rio Conference.

[11] A key prerequisite is that the issue should already be on the agenda and the expertise of NGOs should be seen as relevant and reasonable.

example, rights of women (Chen 1996). The literature argues that as governments are the sole decision makers at UN conferences, their attitude toward civil society could have a significant impact on the latter's possibilities of influence. The success of women's NGOs in adding feminist ideas to the Cairo Programme of Action in 1994 resulted in a backlash during the preparations for the 1995 Beijing conference: during preparatory meetings, women participants faced restrictions on access and accreditation to official conferences. The most evident measure to sideline a strong feminist presence during the official proceedings was the decision of the Chinese government to isolate the NGO forum in the distant location of Huairou (Petchesky 2003).

The 1993 Vienna conference highlighted the tensions of a strong group of governments, opposed to the engagement of human rights NGOs in UN programmes, that resisted the role of civil society in fact-finding mechanisms and field missions, declaring NGOs to be either politically motivated or linked to terrorists (Gaer 1996). Even though NGOs could claim many successes at the Vienna conference, such as the universality of human rights and the establishment of a High Commissioner for Human Rights, government opposition created serious drawbacks for their future activities. The most serious disadvantage is that international human rights principles and national law only protect NGOs that are "genuinely involved in human rights". In a more positive light, according to Chen (1996), a favourable context for civil society was the UN Decade for Women (1976–1985), which radically changed the international women's movement in three ways: identifying new players on global issues; creating new skills and competencies; and forging critical alliances and coalitions.

It is important to note that, in general, studies tend to analyse civil society as a block. There are almost no disaggregated data, even though research findings show that sections of civil society have quite dissimilar experiences of summits in terms of access, objectives of their participation, resources, ideologies and so on (Pianta 2001). Take as an example the objectives of CSO participation in UN summits. In practice, many NGOs attend summits not so much to influence governments, but rather to influence other NGOs. Therefore, these studies show the existence of a variety of purposes for the participation of CSOs at UN summits, but unfortunately the data have not been disaggregated in order to explain the origins of those discrepancies and their subsequent effects on the ability of civil society to achieve its goals. In this sense, an in-depth analysis should take into account the differences within CSOs and the subsequent consequences of the impact that summits have on their structure, strategies and goals.

Impact of participation in UN conferences on civil society

The model based on the idea of influence as described above is unidirectional in nature. It views the interaction between civil society and UN conferences as solely the impact of CSOs on global conferences, and thus has left a vacuum in the understanding of how the participation of civil society at UN conferences has affected the nature and composition of CSOs. Princen and Finger (1994:209) confirm the importance of this analysis in their study of the Rio conference of 1992: "What is relevant to NGOs relations, is not so much NGO influence on UNCED's official negotiated outcomes, but UNCED's impact on the NGO phenomenon". The need for a deeper understanding of this subject is reinforced by recent findings that, in the view of global civil society, UN conferences have the strongest impact on civil society itself (NGLS 2003).

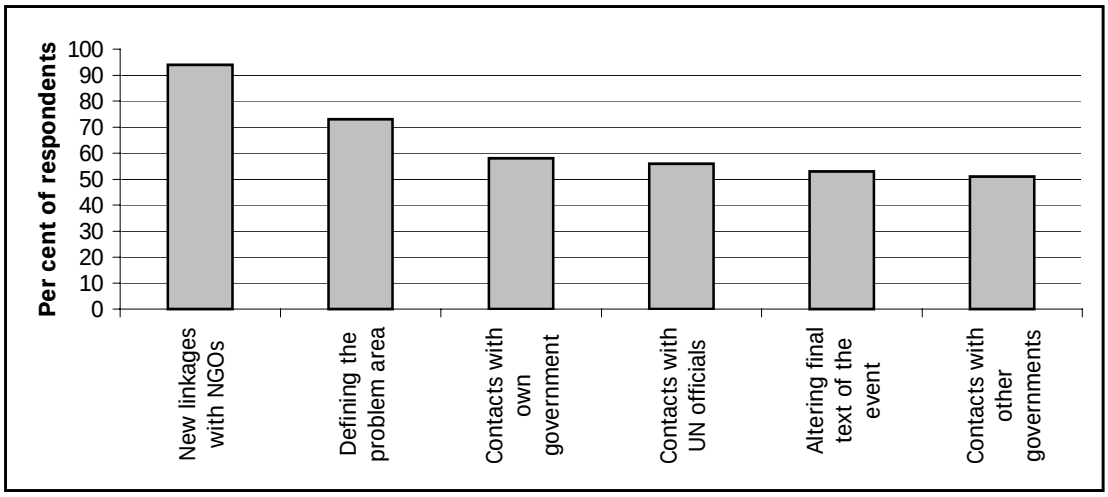
Concurring with this view, the results of a survey of NGOs at the 1995 Copenhagen conference show that the biggest success for civil society was its ability to create and develop new links within civil society (see figure 3).

In relation to environmental NGOs, the UNCED conference process accelerated international environmental NGO growth, and forced NGOs to organize and develop credibility with their constituencies. They also created new and different kinds of NGO relations by bargaining with

[12] Meaning that it is not a threat to national security, relatively inexpensive and bureaucratically easy to administer.

environmental and development actors. NGOs established relationships with the most vocal governments at UNCED, UN agencies and transnational corporations. Overall, NGOs improved their status and bargaining power as international development actors. But at the same time, after the Rio process the environmental movement became more fragmented, splitting into three different factions. The first faction includes the mainstream environmental NGOs, like the World Wildlife Fund that struck bargains with big actors at UNCED, increasing their access to secretariats and delegates of Northern governments. Though for many their credibility increased, they also became somewhat co-opted and isolated themselves from the rest of the environmental movement. The second faction includes the political environmental NGOs, such as Friends of the Earth. This group showed an ambiguous relationship with governments and international environmental and development agencies, probably due to its political activism as a social movement and its primary commitment to national agendas instead of international issues, making it difficult to self-organize. The diverse political orientations also created some leadership conflicts between Northern and Southern NGOs, therefore this sector could not become a stable and working partner in the same way that the first group did with the environment and development establishment. Finally, the third faction consists of NGOs that were not organized at the international level and had no political agenda. Their main focus was to raise awareness of certain issues and they saw the opportunity to do this on a much larger scale in Rio. But as they did not mobilize or build coalitions, very few of them established long-term links with other NGOs (Princen and Finger 1994).

Figure 3: NGOs define areas of their success at intergovernmental meetings



Source: Krut (1997).

This paper shows the importance of a two-way analysis and consequently the need to take into account the interaction of civil society and UN conferences as a basis for future research. Concurrently, a number of indicators of changes in civil society due to their participation in summits can be found indirectly in the literature. These changes focus mainly on the consequences of NGOs influencing policies by providing information, consultation and lobbying; but some look beyond these to issues of surveillance and monitoring. Some of the changes experienced by civil society are building skills and abilities (Chen 1996; Petchesky 2000, 2003), creating new institutions, networking with CSOs and constructing alternative proposals (Pianta and Silva 2003) that signal positive effects on civil society activism. On the other hand, the more troubling effects of the engagement of civil society are identified as losing their independent voice (Conca 1996), increasing competitive pressure on CSOs, succumbing to the agendas of donors (Pinter 2001), and altering of the organizational structure of civil society.

Given this, research shows that while civil society is entering the world of multilateralism (Lipschutz 1992), it is assimilating its norms and practices and becoming more resourceful and

effective. During the UN decade of women, international women's movements needed to build consensus and coalitions to bridge the ideological and material differences between women's groups. For that purpose, using different strategies of lobbying and collective action—such as women's congresses and women's caucuses or tribunals—helped these groups develop new skills and abilities (Chen 1996). They subsequently created a strategic process and methodology that could be applied to future conferences (Petchesky 2000). There were two main reasons for the success of the women's caucus model in influencing the conferences of the 1990s: it was well organized and focused, and it had an experienced leadership that provided guidance and lobbying skills to other groups less familiar with the UN system. Moreover, women's NGOs had the extensive knowledge and experience of the issues being debated that government delegations needed and often lacked (Petchesky 2003).

With various degrees of success, the summit process engages civil society in new institutional arrangements and developments. Despite the fact that these are generally short term and end when the conference or initial funding is finished, there are some long-term experiences, whose success depends on their objectives and internal organization. For instance, after the Rio conference of 1992, the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) created an NGO steering committee[13], which developed new and innovative mechanisms for non-governmental participation (Howell 1999). The objective of the NGO steering committee was to put forward the view of civil society to the CSD and provide follow-up to the conference. This institutional arrangement treated civil society as one of its stakeholders, and as such civil society needed to produce a unified position. Considering the diversity of civil society this proved to be quite problematic, and NGOs ended up spending more time talking to each other than lobbying governments. The steering committee was dismantled in 2001 due to concerns related to accountability.

The World Summit for Social Development prompted the construction of some monitoring mechanisms within civil society, such as Social Watch[14] (Abugre 2002). By contrast to the previous experience, the model of civil society as a pressure group inspired the creation of Social Watch. At the PrepCom, the idea of creating a steering NGO committee was explicitly rejected by many Southern NGOs, because it would divert energy and resources from the priority objective of exerting influence over the conference outcome to organizational and procedural matters. One of the keys for the long-term achievements of this initiative was its organizational principle that stressed the independence of national groups, both organizationally and financially, which in turn implied a lack of a unified position. Nevertheless, the question that remains to be answered is how effective this strategy is in strengthening political will to implement the commitments made. Unfortunately, the loose organizational principle at the base of the success of Social Watch makes it difficult to assess its impact (Bissio and Garcé 2000).

Through UN conferences, CSOs create bonds and coalitions and discuss strategies for action, since much of their success depends on the ability to create consensus. Pianta (2002) highlights how the objectives of civil society at parallel summits are equally divided between making links with other CSOs and influencing government delegations. For example, 52 per cent of the NGOs at the 1995 Copenhagen conference stated that the reason for their participation was to strengthen their own NGO, whereas 46 per cent participated to learn more about a specific issue, 40 per cent to influence their own national government, and 36 per cent to alter the final outcome of the conference (Krut 1997). At the same time, summits have unveiled the economic

[13] The steering committee functioned from 1996 to 2001 and was a self-organized coordinating body representing NGOs and other major groups identified in Agenda 21, with both a Southern and Northern co-chair and representatives of issue caucuses, major groups and regional networks from around the world. Its role was to facilitate the involvement of NGOs and other major groups at every annual session of the CSD.

[14] Social Watch was created in 1996 as an international watchdog network informed by national citizens' groups and aimed at strengthening the political will to implement the commitments made at the World Summit for Social Development in 1995 (Bissio and Garcé 2000). National groups report, through the national Social Watch report, on the progress—or regression—toward these commitments and goals, and are responsible for holding authorities accountable for the policies in place regarding the agreed commitments.

and power structure within civil society, which focuses on the inequality between Northern and Southern NGOs. This has been a neglected issue that civil society has to address promptly in order to be able to move from utilitarian cooperation toward more stable convergences (Conca 1996).

Furthermore, other studies show that the global conferences encouraged civil society to forge alternative proposals. When analysing parallel summits, Pianta and Silva (2003) demonstrate the growing assertion of the autonomy of civil society's global initiative. While previously parallel summits were organized to coincide with official ones, there is now an increase in independent gatherings, reflecting a shift in the aim of civil society participation from networking with other CSOs in 2002 to the construction of alternatives in 2003 (Pianta 2002). Mainly by means of their participation in parallel summits, civil society seems to be acquiring more independence from UN proceedings.

There is the view that the role of civil society groups in global governance has also had some detrimental effects on their activism. First, working closer with governments and IGOs implies a certain level of co-option; for instance, NGOs in national delegations may have to tone down their critical voices at home (Conca 1996). Furthermore, the process of globalization has created an exponential growth in links between CSOs, while at the same time it has produced different economic realities in which these organizations are embedded. Currently, pressure for funding is intensifying, making CSOs compete for funds and challenging the ideals of cooperation and solidarity that this sector advocates. The decline in government funding and the higher demands of beneficiaries and donors increasingly requires CSOs to "perform or perish" (SustainAbility 2003). Moreover, this economic distribution of resources creates in turn some structural inequality problems within civil society that question its own representativeness. When asked what restricted their participation at the Social Summit, for example, NGOs mentioned larger NGOs, English-language-run NGOs and Northern NGOs (Krut 1997).

In addition, there is also a concentration of funds and resources that benefits the largest INGOs headquartered in North America or Western Europe. According to a recent estimate, the NGO sector is worth one trillion dollars a year globally (SustainAbility 2003). The sector has an oligopolic structure, in which nine major federations[15] control almost half of the market (Donini 1996). In particular, the UN seems to have encouraged this process of polarization and concentration within the NGO community, as it might find it more accessible to work with large consortia than with individual organizations. Accordingly, it seems that the inequalities within civil society that UN conferences helped to unveil have also been the products of the conference process. In order to address this, the United Nations Secretary-General's Panel of Eminent Persons on UN–Civil Society Relations (PEPUN-CSR 2004) has proposed to level the differences between Northern and Southern civil society by creating a special fund to enhance Southern civil society capacity to engage with UN deliberative processes, operations and partnerships.

Regarding personnel mobility between civil society and civil service, studies suggest there is an increasing exchange of skills that run the risk of diminishing differences between the NGO and governmental sectors. For instance, some authors state that human rights NGOs would probably be the principal sources of personnel for future UN human rights monitoring missions (Gaer 1996). Moreover, there is also a process of homogenization in practices, management styles and activities of NGOs that result from donor pressure to conform to established norms and standards of organizational functioning (Donini 1996). Studies also show that the main funding for global civil society comes from development initiatives and foundations in the United States (Pinter 2001). When civil society relies on this funding for its survival, the priorities of funders could become those of CSOs, subsequently affecting their mission and

[15] Save the Children Federation, Oxfam Federation, CARE, World Vision International, Doctors without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières), Coalition of Catholic Development NGOs (Coopération Internationale pour le Développment et la Solidarité), Association of Protestant Development Organizations in Europe, and Eurostep, which is the main coalition of European secular NGOs.

objectives. The civil society organization called Etc., Group (2003:05) asserts: "We NGOs have an enormous chameleon capacity to turn ourselves into anything that can attract funding".

Sometimes conferences were also the scenario of tensions and conflicts between civil society participants. The World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance and its NGO forum created strong divisions between states as well as between CSOs. These internal tensions ended with a tense plenary NGO meeting and a controversial NGO final declaration adopted through questionable procedures. World conferences are meant to be used as a space for dialogue; however, sometimes ideological differences within civil society show a dark side by exposing its fractures, its incapacity for respectful dialogue, and even its suspicions of local grassroots activities (Glasius and Kaldor 2002). Transnational women's movements that participated in the conferences of the 1990s had to contest the issues at stake with other sectors of civil society that diverge sharply from an ideological standpoint. The disturbing consequence of this was that as women's caucuses in Cairo and Beijing put all of their energies into combating fundamentalist and traditionalist attacks on reproductive and sexual rights, they were diverted from ensuring that the structural and macroeconomic conditions for those rights be included in the declaration and plans of action (Petchesky 2003).

Civil Society, World Conferences and Global Governance

Generally, studies focusing on the role of civil society in global conferences make broad assessments of the "role of NGOs in the international system", suggesting that the state has been under particular scrutiny (Van Rooy 1997). For instance, Uvin (1996:174) asserts, "these two processes (scaling down of summits and scaling up the grass roots) suggest that the state is being caught in the middle, squeezed from both sides and pushed into irrelevance". However, the literature tends to provide limited analytical tools to envisage the part played by civil society in global governance. There are not enough links between theoretical and empirical findings on the participation of NGOs at international meetings and thus little is known about new ways of organizing consensus (Martens 2000). Or, as Smith et al. (1997:270) argue, in relation to transnational social movements NGOs "should explicitly recognise that they are engaged in 'experiments' in global governance and should more self-consciously be evaluating the results".

This section discusses two different styles of relating the state to other sectors of society regarding policy deliberations that have current debates about structure and that have had a particular impact in UN circles. In addition, the views these models portray on the role of civil society are reviewed, as well as the implications of their usage in the rhetoric of UN conferences. This section also outlines some key discussions in the civil society debate and their implications for the participation of civil society in global conferences.

The state-centred approach based on a territorial representational system—by which most UN decision-making bodies were created and continue to function—guided studies of international relations through the Cold War era and beyond. Within this framework, the basic units of analysis are nation-states, while civil society is viewed as an "outsider" in the actual decision-making process that could make some valuable contributions through providing information.

During the post–Cold War era, the growth of NGOs and other forms of international collaboration prompted greater participation by non-state actors in international relations, and catapulted a re-examination of concepts that appeared inadequate to explain contemporary phenomena (Ku and Weiss 1998). The main argument of this re-examination is that the process of globalization questioned the foundations of modern states, and that decisions at a national level have crucial effects beyond its territory and more resolutions are taken at a global and local level. Then there is a need for rethinking the structure of international decision making. Falk (cited by Foster 1999) asserts that, "Globalisation is gradually disembedding the domestic

social contract between the state and society, which had become integral to the programme of welfare capitalism and social democracy". Others argue that this does not mean the end of the state, but rather that sovereign statehood becomes more and more impracticable (Scholte et al. 1999). Nevertheless, some authors contest this argument and assert that the extent to which globalization constrains state policies has been hugely exaggerated, especially in relation to Northern states, and that this discourse has the objective of deflecting political energies from national arenas so as to further facilitate the globalization of capital (Laxer and Halperin 2003).
These debates resulted in the development of societal approaches to the relationships between the state and non-state actors, which assert that states are not the only actors to be taken into consideration and regard states and their societies as the basic entities of analysis. By means of emphasizing the multiple identities of citizens, societal approaches support systems of global governance where non-state actors became key and active collaborators side-by-side with states (Otto 1996; Martens 2000). Civil society is then viewed as either a formal or informal "insider" of decision-making processes. Furthermore, it is generally accepted that the flourishing of global civil society has contributed much to turning the attention away from state-centric approaches and toward society-dominated perspectives (Kaldor 2003; Martens 2000).

Cox (1997) calls internationalization the processes by which states are permeated by external forces and shaped by economic pressures, information flows and population movements. The main factor of this development is economic globalization. This process implies that while the debates of politics—trade, economic, environment and so on—are rapidly globalizing, the process of doing politics is not (PEPUN-CSR 2004). The internationalization process coexists with a simultaneous development that focuses on democratization at the global level, or the process that attempts to reduce democratic deficits in the governance of social relationships. Global civil society is seen by many as a key aspect of this democratizing force because it potentially offers important possibilities of reducing those deficits through public education, platform building, fuelling debates, increasing transparency and accountability, and boosting democratic legitimacy of governance structures (Scholte 2001). As a result, international civil society is seen as a force for democratizing international relations as the representative of world opinion, and thus as a force that could create a more egalitarian and democratic world.

Global civil society can be defined as "the sphere of ideas, values, institutions, organizations, networks, and individuals located *between* the family, the state, and the market and operating *beyond* the confines if national societies, polities and economies" (Anheier et al. 2001:17). The key distinction with civil society per se is the idea of activism that tackles international problems and acts across geographical borders, and is generally interrelated with the process of enhancing globalization and "turbo-capitalism" (Keane 2001). The main actors in this sphere are international NGOs that are increasingly developing links with governments, intergovernmental policy makers and transnational corporations; self-organizations across borders of transnational communities; and international social movements, civic networks and social forums (Anheier et al. 2003). Regarding the presence of international civil society, the majority of INGOs are now concentrated in the Western world and the main urban regions of the rest of the globe (Anheier and Katz 2003), while Central and Eastern Europe and middle-income countries experienced a faster increase of INGO membership during the 1990s (Anheier et al. 2003).

Yet this new concept still generates debate within the academic community. The idea of global civil society is drawn from an analogy to civil society in domestic society where it is interlinked with the state and the market. If the basic idea of civil society is about a sphere independent from the state, Laxer and Halperin (2003) question which structure global civil society is supposed to be independent from since there is no global state. Here lies one of its main problems, because if global governance is anything but a "world government", then there is no equivalent to national states at a global level. The model of a centralized public apparatus has not been transposed from the national to the global scenario, and instead global relations are regulated in a "post-statist" fashion that has no single authority (Scholte 2001).

In addition, some contest the empirical foundations of the concept by asserting that there has been neither a rapid growth of NGOs nor the emergence of transnational social movements (Laxer and Halperin 2003). In a milder tone, this idea is challenged by pointing out that global civil society appears to bring together people from all around the globe, but in reality it is only concentrated in developed regions (Smith et al. 1997). Furthermore, international NGOs are sometimes considered Western, educated, middle-class organizations, which are not a channel for the "world citizenry" to express their views but instead act more like a vehicle for international elites to communicate with other international elites in governments and UN agencies (K. Anderson 2000). Furthermore, the links between global civil society and democracy are also challenged by the fact that the most influential NGOs are not in themselves democratic (Clark 2003). Moreover, the organizational base of INGOs is heavily concentrated in northwestern Europe. For instance, more than half of international secretariats are based in the European Union and one third of members are in Western Europe; and in spite of globalization, many parts of the world have no access to telephones or the Internet and are unable to participate in global initiatives (Laxer and Halperin 2003).

Models of civil society participation in global conferences

NGO participation in global conferences most likely unfolds through three different phases. First, NGOs work mainly as "outsiders" in order to put issues on the international agenda. Subsequently, they start relating more as "informal insiders" and engage unofficially with governments and international organizations. And in the third phase, they officially and actively participate in deliberations by international organizations (Weiss 1999).[16]

In official documentation of summits, CSOs are generally defined as observers (Office of the President of the Millennium Assembly 2002); yet the language that justifies their engagement varies among different summits. Concurring with the two frameworks on the relations between states and non-state actors mentioned above, summits provide two distinct arguments favouring CSO activities: one that views civil society as an interest group, and another that sees it as a stakeholder. It should be noted that these two models are used interchangeably throughout different summits, but it is useful to distinguish between them as they prescribe different ways of engagement between civil society and summits.

The opposition between civil society and the state, popular during the democratization struggles of the 1980s, and the idea that states are the sole decision makers in matters of global social policy, inspired the first model. Civil society is positioned as an external force, an "outsider" that tries to influence states' performance. More specifically, the role carved by civil society has two main characteristics: (i) it depicts civil society as a group of NGOs that acts as an interest group; and (ii) its purpose in global governance is to provide expert information and influence states.[17]

The rhetoric of civil society participation—especially in the conferences at the beginning of the twenty-first century—tended to shift toward a model describing civil society in terms of the conception emanating from societal perspectives on global governance. The Commission on Global Governance (1996:2–3) stresses this point in its final report:

> At the global level, governance has been viewed primarily as intergovernmental relationships, but it must now be understood as also involving non-governmental organizations (NGOs), citizens' movements, multinational

[16] PEPUN-CSR (2004:16) asserts that, "member states need opportunities for collective decision-making, but they should signal their preparedness to engage other actors in deliberative processes".

[17] Agenda 21 describes the role as follows: "Non-governmental organizations, including those non-profit organizations representing groups addressed in the present section of Agenda 21, possess well-established and diverse experience, expertise and capacity in fields which will be of particular importance to the implementation and review of environmentally sound and socially responsible sustainable development, as envisaged throughout Agenda 21. The community of non-governmental organizations, therefore, offers a global network that should be tapped, enabled and strengthened in support of efforts to achieve these common goals" (UNDSD 2003:27.3).

> corporations and global capital markets. Interacting with these are global mass media of dramatically enlarged influence.

The most recent UN review of its relationship to civil society suggests that the UN system should view civil society, the private sector and the state as "constituencies, or stakeholders, of the Organization's processes" (PEPUN-CSR 2004:13). A stakeholder is commonly defined as anyone who affects or is affected by the operations of an organization (Freeman 1984). While the previous framework portrayed civil society as a pressure group that could influence international policy debates, this view goes further by giving civic activism some rights to participate in decision making as civil society is potentially affected by those decisions.

Box 2: The development of partnerships in UN summits

An example of the interest group model in UN conferences is the creation of partnerships. The Johannesburg summit, in its effort to fulfil Agenda 21, centred mainly on creating partnerships for sustainable development; and today the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) lists hundreds of partnerships launched during and after this summit in order to mobilize resources seeking to put these values into practice (Zadek 2004). In addition, many other partnerships were created to work toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Although the idea of partnerships is highly contentious,[18] partnerships between UN organizations, civil society and corporations are nevertheless becoming a modus operandi throughout the UN system (Malena 2004).

The development of partnerships brings uncertainty about the new roles and responsibilities of the different actors involved, and in the perceived "laissez-faire" manner of managing these initiatives. They can have two main implications for UN organizations. First, partnerships can alter the way these organizations are funded. For example, before the partnership boom, 90 per cent of UNDP resources were core funds, whereas now that proportion has dropped to 30 per cent, creating some fear about corporate funding distorting its mandate and priorities. And second, they also have implications for governance structures; for example, UNAIDS is governed by a tripartite arrangement of states, civil society and businesses (Malena 2004).

The second framework, which describes civil society as a stakeholder, defines the composition of society in organizational terms and divides it into three sectors, each with its own ruling principle: (i) the motivation of governments is to rule and govern; (ii) the goal of the private sector is to make a profit; and (iii) the purpose of civil society is to defend citizens' rights.[19] This model is probably best represented by Marc Nerfin's metaphor of the Prince, the Merchant and the Citizen, which symbolizes the government, the private sector and civil society respectively (Gordenker and Weiss 1996a). As can be seen from figure 4, which gives a simplified version of the three-sector model, Northern countries are portrayed as having equal portions of the three organizational forms, whereas Southern and Eastern countries are visualized as having a disproportionately larger public sector.

This model advocates for a stakeholder system in order to increase participation between the three pillars of society in decision-making processes. Given this, one of the objectives of global conferences is to attempt to enhance the role of civil society and the private sector. United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan (2002), in his report *Strengthening of the United Nations: An Agenda for Further Change*, stresses that a plurality of actors—namely civil society and the private sector—are increasingly involved in international cooperation, thus explaining why, in the Millennium Declaration, member states agreed to give them additional opportunities to contribute to the realization of the UN's goals.

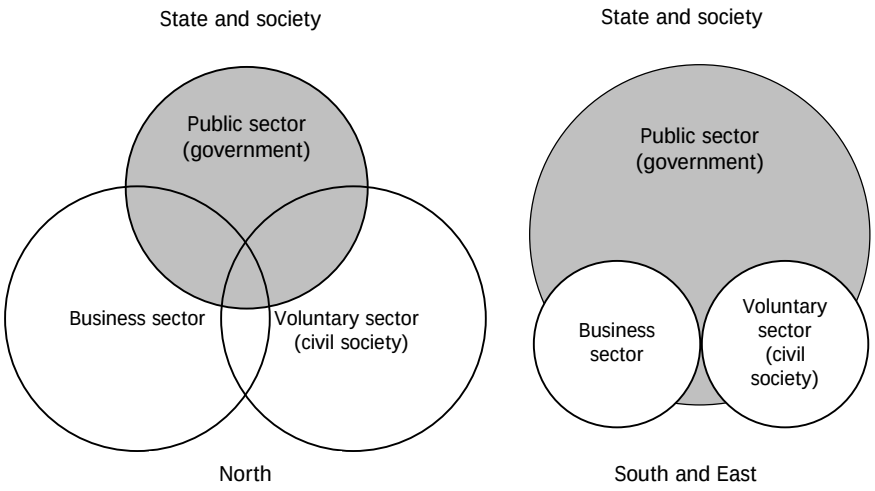
At the International Conference on Financing for Development in 2002, the General Assembly explicitly asked for full involvement of all relevant stakeholders. As a consequence, in addition

[18] For a critical discussion of UN partnerships, see Utting (2000) and Zammit (2003).

[19] It should be noted that only civil society is associated with the notion of citizen, which ironically is at the base of modern democratic governments.

to the official participants, mechanisms were put in place for "non-official stakeholders"—that is, NGOs and the business sector. This process was unique in that it created innovative high-level roundtables, allowed NGOs to comment and amend the text being negotiated on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis at the PrepCom stage, and finally, at the first follow-up, invited NGOs to address the General Assembly (Platz 2004).[20]

Figure 4: Three-sector model



This approach empowers civil society to move toward becoming an "insider" on global policy debates. Nonetheless, it also raises some tensions related to the outcome of the participation of civil society, as well as to its relationship with the business sector.

Distinct ideologies behind concepts of civil society

Societal approaches to global governance view CSOs as representing embryonic institutional structures for global governance. The tensions between internationalization of economic and social forces and the subsequent drive for democratization described by Cox (1997) can create, at a global level, dynamics similar to those described by Karl Polanyi's double movement: from disembedding the economy from society, to seeking to bring the global economy under societal control. These dynamics are also reflected in the tensions between different usages of the multistakeholder approach. The meaning of civil society is permeable in the sense that it can be moulded to suit diverse political agendas, thus different theories can shape civil society with diverse objectives in global policy making.

There are different frameworks relating to how the participation of civil society at UN summits might be realized. The multistakeholder approach to international relations can be used with two slightly different assumptions; one that stresses participation and is related to neo-Gramscian and some pluralistic theories of civil society, and the other that accentuates privatization and is interlinked with more neoliberal interpretations of civil society. The first viewpoint usually points out that the function of civil society is to ensure that governance is democratic, accountable, transparent, inclusive, participatory and equitable. Likewise, this vision advocates that the role of civil society is to democratize global governance by harnessing the advantages of globalization while resisting its drawbacks (Krut 1997). By contrast, the second viewpoint stresses civil society's control over the state; and by diminishing the role of

[20] It is worth noting that this discourse of increasing access of NGOs to decision-making procedures does not necessarily mean that their comments are actually taken on board. As some argue, one of the reasons for conferences to open up is that it does not make much of a difference; they only deal with "soft" issues. There is an inverse relationship between the interests of governments and access of NGOs. Scholte (2002:2) argues, "Few policy innovations were included in the official final declaration, but they circulated quite liberally in—and thereby gained strength from—the Financing for Development process".

the state and allowing the private sector and civil society to take its place, it slowly tends to privatize decision-making processes. This is evidenced in this paradigm by the notion of citizen as slowly drifting from being at the foundation of the state and political system[21] to the shores of civil society.

Box 3: Two main theories of civil society

The Hegelian tradition was elaborated through Marx's writings and led to contemporary post-Gramscian approaches. Meanwhile, liberal political philosophy explored by authors like Putnam et al. (1993), Fukuyama (1995) and Gellner (1994) followed the neoliberal pluralistic path. Kaldor (2002) classifies the different stances within civil society into activist, neoliberal and postmodern versions, and associates neoliberals with the goal of exporting the Western model of governance, while the "activist" version is closely associated with neo-Gramscians with an emancipatory goal of radical extension of democracy and global justice.[a]

The neoliberal pluralistic paradigm

Neoliberal pluralist approaches are linked to the pluralist principle that associations are the precondition for freedom and equity in a democratic society as well as with the neoliberal stance of rolling back the state. CSOs represent a forum for individual political participation through organization and association, and are often cast as the counterbalance of the state (Lenzen 2002). The underlying belief is that pluralism can hold states accountable and make political institutions more efficient. Theorists like Gellner, Putnam et al. and Fukuyama focus on the neo-Tocquevillan case for civil society that stresses the positive and indirect outcome of associationalism and its importance for a healthy democracy.

This ideological perspective sheds light upon certain aspects of civil society. For example: (i) association is a way to protect the interests of minorities; (ii) there is a linkage between a flourishing civil society and democratic practices; and (iii) civil society acts as a counterbalance to state involvement in every aspect of social life.

The neo-Gramscian paradigm

The second ideological perspective, which is rooted in neo-Gramscism,[b] refutes the opposition between civil society and the state as defined by the previous position, and emphasizes the interdependence of these two spheres. Civil society is seen as more than a place for creating social cohesion but also as an arena where the struggle for hegemony is contested, and where these organizations are engaged in setting up and negotiating the rules of a given social order. Authors like Cohen and Arato (1994), Lewis (2001) and Harbeson et al. (1994) belong in this category.

This viewpoint provides three key conclusions. First, it separates civil society from both the state and the market.[c] Second, as part of the left-wing tradition, it depicts civil society as a contested arena, a space for struggle (Van Rooy 1998), and provides a basis to understand civil society as a multiplicity of groups, each with their own stances, that battle for legitimacy. Third, the highly variable character of civil society is depicted along with the acknowledgement that certain sections of civil society can be repressive and undermine democracy (Lenzen 2002).

Notes:

a This idea is also taken up by neoliberal approaches as emancipation of the state. Empowerment is seen as emancipation and shrinking of the state, but it does not address the issue of liberation from market forces.

b Gramsci was concerned with what, in Marxist terms, is called the "super-structure". He theorized civil society as the arena separated from the state and the market where ideological hegemony is contested. Gramsci concentrated on the dimensions of association and cultural intermediation, implying that this social space contained a variety of organizations that simultaneously challenge and uphold the existing order. In addition, he considers the state to be the sum of political and civil society (Lewis 2001; Cohen and Arato 1994).

c Though this division carries a certain level of ambiguity, it has been subsequently taken up by many international organizations and has been thoroughly discussed by the academic community.

These two possible utilizations of the multistakeholder system are generally not emphasized in the literature and their consequences for policy making have not been sufficiently analysed empirically. Furthermore, these are two characteristics of theories of civil society that also have important consequences for their application in global policy making.

[21] The notion of citizen was initially created to describe the relationship between subjects and their state.

Civil society and the market

Some academic debates concerning definitions of civil society have shown the ambiguity of its relationship with the market. For example, while Marx equated civil society with "bourgeois society" and Hegel also included market transactions in the realm of civil society, the neo-Gramscian tradition distinguishes between civil society and the market, the latter being the profit-making commodity production and exchange arena (Keane 2001). Neoliberal approaches focus mainly on the distinction between civil society and the state, but also describe civil society as the space of nonprofit organizations (Kaldor 2002).

However, due to recent development in global civil society, these distinctions find important empirical objections. There are increasing corporate facets to global civil society. NGOs have been adopting corporate strategies and are currently more open to partnerships with businesses, while the business sector is incurring into local and global civil society spaces by means of, for example, social responsibility programmes (Anheier et al. 2003). Furthermore, global civil society cannot survive without money and monetary exchanges, or without the market forces unleashed by globalization (Keane 2001). With the increasing links between these two spheres, the conceptual boundaries useful as ideal types become blurred when applied to reality.

This ambiguity in turn can have important consequences for how the UN system defines civil society and relates to both spheres of society, including global conferences where the UN has taken different approaches to relations with civil society and market forces. United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan asserted, "When I speak about civil society, I don't mean only non-governmental organizations, though they are a very important part of it. I also mean universities, foundations, labour unions and—yes—private corporations" (Zadek 2004:6). Additionally, the United Nations Secretary-General's PEPUN-CSR in 2003 adopted broad and inclusive definitions of civil society that incorporate parliamentarians and the private sector (Cardoso 2003). Nevertheless, the final report of this review attempts to clarify these boundaries and views civil society as referring "to associations of citizens entered into voluntarily to advance their interests, ideas and ideologies" (PEPUN-CSR 2004:13). The term explicitly does not include profit-making activities or governing bodies. Yet distinctions become more ambiguous when it comes to NGOs that, according to this report, refer to "all organizations of relevance to the UN that are not central governments and were not created by intergovernmental decision, including associations of businesses, parlamentarians and local authorities" (PEPUN-CSR 2004:13).

There is a danger that this lack of clarity can subtly intertwine civil society and markets in such a way that the latter might subsume the former. SustainAbility, UN Global Compact and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) state that:

> The key point here is that the whole NGO landscape is tilting not just towards partnerships with business, which many NGOs still see as a slightly more sophisticated form of philanthropy, but towards market-based solutions, market mechanisms and, for better or worse, market dynamics (SustainAbility 2003:51).

Hence, the three-sphere organizational model discussed above, after shrinking the state and enveloping civil society, runs the risk of having only one organizational structure left—that is, business—and giving space for economic interests to be expressed in an arena that is usually viewed as the space for people-led proposals.

Descriptive, functional and normative definitions of civil society

Some of the diversity in the assertions of civil society arises from its mix of descriptive and normative contents (Anheier et al. 2001). Civil society as an empirical category becomes a label for the sum of organizations that are generally different from the state. As Axel Honneth's definition notes, civil society is "all civil institutions and organisations which are prior to the

state" (cited in Chandhoke 2002). Descriptive definitions acknowledge the reality of civil society, but can sometimes include organizations that do not necessarily perform the social function that they are supposed to. For instance, many UN conferences define civil society in practical terms as NGOs, but that does not necessarily mean that they act as civil society; for example, in certain parts of the world, NGOs might not be the main organizational form that conforms civil society. The fact that in global conferences a particular type of organization—NGOs—is identified with civil society tends to narrow its meaning. And due to NGOs being a typical Western way of organizing civil society (Seckinelgin 2002; Lewis 2001), other forms of non-Western associations are being left aside. Cultural relativists argue that NGOs imply the principles of voluntary and formal associations. But many types of associations developed in non-Western countries challenge these two principles. For example, even though many religious and ethnic movements do not respect these two principles, they are key actors in non-Western civil societies (Kaldor 2003). Although ECOSOC, after the 1996 review, and currently the PEPUN-CSR aim to create financial mechanisms to enhance participation of Southern NGOs[22], it is still one organizational form being privileged over another.

By contrast, functional definitions of civil society have the advantage of regarding civil society as a set of rules or functions that are different from other societal spaces. The view that closely associates civil society with civility is a particular way of conceptualizing civil society that was especially fertile in UN grounds. Many proponents describe global civil society as progressive and democratic, or even "good", society (Laxer and Halperin 2003). Another ingredient to this moral assertion of civil society is the concept of social capital, which civil society is supposed to harness (Putnam et al. 1993). Social capital is described as community volunterism, selflessness and public or civic spirit, and carries this moral tone to the civil society debate (Van Rooy 1998). This assumes that "civil" implies a normative behaviour of these organizations that is altruistic, developmental and democratic. For instance, Naidoo and Tandon (1999:6–7) describe global civil society as "the network of autonomous associations that rights-bearing and responsibility-laden citizens voluntarily create to address and promote collective aspirations", which could be a good example of what Keane (2001) called "proletariat in civvies".

As a result, civil society becomes intertwined with value-driven conceptions that, by definition, are worth encouraging and supporting. This approach—due to its value-driven nature—could fall into one of the traps of considering (a priori) governments and business as self-interested, and civil society as the only space for the development of common good and accountability of the state and private sector. Agenda 21, drafted in 1992 at UNCED, states:

> Non-governmental organizations play a vital role in the shaping and implementation of participatory democracy. Their credibility lies in the responsible and constructive role they play in society. … The nature of the independent role played by non-governmental organizations within a society calls for real participation; therefore, independence is a major attribute of non-governmental organizations and is the precondition of real participation (UNDSD 2003:27.1).

Yet the violent incidents in Seattle, Prague and Genoa coupled with the terrorist threat after 11 September 2001 challenged this understanding of the ethical nature of civil society. Governments and IGOs became more suspicious of civil society's "hidden agendas" and security challenges. For example, UNDP (2000) considers the growth of undemocratic and oppressive citizens groups, and the opportunistic and self-interest groups within civil society, as two major concerns. Recent reviews (NGLS 2003) have suggested how to distinguish between "civil" and "uncivil" society. Still, this has not produced any clear answers.

[22] Access to funding for Southern CSOs to participate at UN summits tends to be arranged afresh for each conference, making the process somewhat irregular and sketchy. Official funds are generally channelled either through the respective secretariat or the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS). In addition, funding opportunities tend to focus on least developed countries, keeping Central and Eastern Europe as well as middle-income countries away from opportunities to participate. Furthermore, as donors make resources available when the summit has gained momentum, they focus mainly on the major summit.

Conclusion

During the 1990s, unparalleled linkages were forged between the international activism of global civil society and the salience of UN-sponsored conferences. As global conferences gained regularity and became an integral part of global policy making, international civil society groups found in them a key venue to influence policies of governments and international organizations, and saw in world conferences an opportunity to enhance their say in the global policy agenda. At the same time, the United Nations found in civil society a partner to increase conferences' legitimacy and constituency. This convergence between the salience of conferences and the international development of civil society moulded the development of these two processes from the 1990s onwards. Consequently, this paper critically assessed the literature on the engagement of civil society and UN conferences during that period.

The literature on civil society at global conferences generally tends to emphasize the influence civil society has over UN summits, but has a propensity to neglect the study of the effects that global governance has on the structure of civil society activism. This review illustrates some of the main issues concerning the effect that global conferences can have on civil society, and it describes the key indicators indirectly found in the literature. This paper notes networking with other CSOs by developing new skills to enhance their advocacy efforts, outlining alternative proposals, creating new institutions, compromising their independence, increasing the pressure for competing for funds, changing their organizational structure and getting closer to donors as the key developments in civil society groups through participation at UN summits.

Likewise, although the existing literature provides broad views on the new role of NGOs in global governance, it does not offer any detailed examinations of the interconnections between their empirical results and theoretical debates on global governance. This paper shows some of the linkages between different frameworks for understanding the relationship between the state and non-state actors, and their implications for policy making and civil society activism.

The state-centred approach to global governance views civil society as an "outsider" to these processes that, in turn, can provide useful inputs through supplying expert information. By contrast, societal approaches identify civil society as an informal or formal "insider" to global policy debates. These two views are also taken up by UN conference arrangements and policies that promote and support the participation of civil society, and create two distinct models: one that situates civil society as an interest group, whereas the other model defines it as a stakeholder. However, the second perspective—with the development of multistakeholder approaches to global policy making—has increased support from a wide political spectrum. Some pluralistic and post-Gramscian views encourage the further involvement of civil society in global policy making as a way to democratize global governance, while others from a neoliberal perspective look for further engagement of non-state actors as a way of taking responsibilities outside the domain of the state.

In addition, this paper also outlined key discussions in the civil society debate and their implication for the participation of civil society at UN conferences. The idea of global civil society, the different ways of distinguishing civil society and the market, as well as defining civil society focusing on either its descriptive or on its normative aspects, were the main issues taken up by this review.

The aim of this paper was to review the current literature regarding civil society, UN conferences and their subsequent interaction. The spirit of the enquiry has been to go beyond the description of opinions of individual authors and to try to create a map that could shed light for further research in this area. It shows that by looking into what academics and policy makers actually mean when they talk about civil society participation, the term appears to have a multiplicity of meanings. This can create a need for a constant epistemological vigilance in its usage, since these theoretical debates have important implications in the ways policies that promote participation of civil society in global conferences are constructed.

This overview points toward two future directions for research. First, there is a gap in the current literature in relation to the transformations and new developments that civil society experiences as it enters the world of international policy making. In contrast with the unidirectional model depicted above, this review proposed to base future research on a model centred on the interaction or reciprocal effects of civil society and UN conferences. This approach then draws attention to the examination of the effects the new role of civil society in global governance has on its own organizational structure, strategies and opportunities, as well as its political roles. Second, the descriptive nature of the studies undertaken so far, coupled with the lack of analysis of the concepts used, highlights the need for more solid theoretical grounding for empirical studies in this field. This would construct the basis for in-depth discussions about the diverse consequences of supporting civil society participation. A crucial issue, for example, is the utilization of the multistakeholder system—which is gaining momentum within international organizations—that could either encourage participation of excluded groups or further disengage state institutions from the global policy debates. If these theoretical and political differences are not unveiled, then the policy implications and empirical effects of different models of participation cannot be analysed in order to challenge the assumption that some models are sine qua non beneficial.

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