

The Use of Multi-Meetings

— Proposal for
Improvement to
NGO / UN Relationships

A group of London-based NGOs met at the request of the NGO Standing Committee of the Conference of international Nongovernmental Organizations Approved for Consultative Status with UNESCO and agreed to transmit the following suggestion to the Committee. (The matter was duly considered at the March 1970 meeting and postponed for consideration at the June meeting).

Proposal

As a relatively simple change of procedure which does not imply any « massive structural reorganization » of NGO relations, each of the various « consultative status » NGO Conferences could be scheduled to take place at the same place during the same period, instead of being held in different places at different periods. In other words without in any way linking them together procedurally it would be quite possible to hold the plenary sessions in the same physical setting (e.g. in neighbouring conference rooms with a common reception /refreshment area) mainly as concurrent sessions with the possibility of joint sessions on substantive matters where these were felt to be useful (e. g. a briefing on development).

Resultant Organizational Flexibility

In the case of international NGOs a multi-meeting could be arranged every 1 or 2 years to bring together the NGO representatives which meet on such occasions as the ECOSOC/NGO Conference, the UNESCO/NGO Conference, or any other UN/NGO grouping where relevant. But the programme committee, which could include representatives of these bodies and of the relevant Specialized Agencies, need not limit the multi-meeting to sessions on the procedural aspects of consultative status. Substantive matter meetings of NGO representatives could also be scheduled so that the following range of possibilities is made available for use as required :

- separate consultative status procedure formal conferences (ECOSOC/NGO, UNESCO/NGO, UNICEF/NGO, etc.).
- separate standing committee and bureau meetings of any such plenary bodies.
- working or ad hoc groups of NGOs meeting separately around each consultative status con-

ference on either substantive or procedural matters.

- working or ad hoc groups of NGOs meeting jointly where the groups around each consultative status conference have a sufficiently common or overlapping interest (e.g. development, peace, youth, education, etc.).
- joint plenary conferences on substantive matters whenever a common interest topic requires discussion. This could either take the form of a plenary conference arranged jointly by several of the consultative status groupings, or it could be scheduled within the multi-meeting framework as a session totally independent of the formal groupings as a one-off meeting. There is, for example, no reason why mixed plenary conferences should not draft resolutions which, for the benefit of the Agency concerned, would only be actually voted by those NGOs present which had consultative status with that Agency.
- nor is it necessary for the programme committee to limit participation to Agency-oriented NGO groups. If the multi-meeting setting is a useful occasion for an NGO group, not specifically associated with the UN or its programmes to meet (perhaps because most of the members are present for other sessions within the multi-meeting framework), then such activity should be facilitated.
- separate substantive matter formal or working groups (e.g. on disarmament, women, childhood and adolescence, crime and treatment of offenders) could be held as appropriate ; as could
- contact meetings of executives of NGOs with similar problems (for example, such a multi-meeting would be an appropriate occasion for the potentially important, and little known, informal contact meetings between the executives of the major formal scientific NGO groupings which have been initiated by ICSU).

The attitude should be to maximize inter-NGO activity, and the possibility for NGO-IGO activity, rather than to set up barriers to it based on procedural or other criteria.

There could be times when it would be advantageous that participation of an individual NGO at multi-

meetings should not be based on the consultative status criterion (except for admission to procedural or other closed sessions). This is no way affects the rules on the right to vote or speak developed for any particular session, open or closed.

This policy :

- exposes such individuals or organizations to substantive matters related to UN programmes
- provides a context in which representatives of organizations without consultative status with a particular Agency can make informal contact with Agency officials, possibly as a prelude to an official application for consultative status, contracts, etc.

Furthermore, this policy permits individual NGOs if they so wish to schedule meetings of their executive bodies on the occasion of such multi-meetings (whether within the multi-meeting framework or not), with the consequence that members of such executive bodies can both gain some understanding of inter-NGO activity and respond rapidly (if the executive meeting is appropriately scheduled) to questions referred upwards by the NGO's official representative at a particular NGO conference session.

The organization behind the multi-meeting need only be limited to the programme committee and arrangements for a reception desk, document distribution, interpretation and translation. (The latter tasks are usually undertaken by the Agency Secretariat concerned). An additional feature which could well be considered is charging a registration fee to those participants which are not registered as members of an NGO Conference. This could prove to be a very useful source of income, particularly if members of the general public are admitted.

Advantages

The advantages of this proposal may be summarized as follows :

- all the people necessary to make any new NGO-NGO or NGO-IGO activity happen are brought to the same location. What happens and when it happens depends on individual initiative and « corridor activity » during the multi-meeting.
- the multi-meeting provides an occasion on which a variety of formal or informal inter-NGO activities can be catalyzed
 - NGO consultative status conferences for those those NGOs in consultative relations with a Specialized Agency for which such a conference does not exist (Note that such conferences could be single session conferences within the multi-meeting framework. Such short sessions would not normally justify bringing NGO representatives together just for that purpose outside a multi-meeting framework).

- conferences of NGOs with a special concern for a particular continent or region (e.g. Africa, Latin America, etc.)
- conferences of NGOs with a special programme interest (youth, peace, human rights, development, environment, discrimination, crisis relief, etc.)
- conferences of NGOs with technical or scientific preoccupations.
- more meetings are scheduled covering a wider range of topics. It is therefore more useful for an NGO to be represented which should therefore build up attendance and therefore increase the significance of such events. The aim is to make of the multi-meeting an ideal environment from which inter-NGO and NGO/IGO projects can crystallise - possibly catalysed by the presence of foundation representatives.
- from a public relations point of view a yearly or two-yearly multi-meeting would be an ideal opportunity to make evident to the general public any NGO perspectives emerging from the individual conferences. The substantive matter resolutions of some sessions would not be swamped by the procedural context which is totally insignificant to the mass media. Such meetings would merit press participation because of the concentration of NGO representatives (as opposed to the current dispersion which never results in a significant international press reaction). Consequently more attention would be paid to resolutions, where voted by governments and Specialized Agencies. A not unimportant aspect of this is the effect such a large gathering would have on the national affiliates of NGOs which would then have proof of the problems of and need for cooperation between NGOs at international level.
- the multi-meeting is an ideal occasion for the Specialized Agency representatives responsible for contact with NGOs to meet. Furthermore, the switch to greater possibility of discussion of substantive matters would encourage the participation of Agency officials responsible for programmes as opposed to the current limitation to those responsible for NGO relations.
- the multi-meeting provides an occasion on which an NGO's own representatives to each Agency can meet and coordinate their approaches. This helps to resolve the problem of the lack of communication between representatives of the same NGO to different Agencies.
- the looser framework should encourage the participation of NGOs currently avoiding the formal NGO Conferences because of their procedural/human rights emphasis. The framework would for example permit scientific, medi-

cal and professional NGOs both to arrange their own sessions and to participate in procedural conferences or UN programme-oriented sessions where this seemed warranted. The multi-meeting is seen primarily as a collection of meetings of NGOs and only secondarily as a forum for discussion of consultative status matters.

- controversial procedural points which tend to arise in consultative status conferences and block discussion of substantive matters or joint action by limited groups of NGOs are restricted to the appropriate meetings which were conceived for such questions. NGO representatives do not attend such sessions in order to benefit from inter-NGO action-oriented debate, as at present.
- restriction of UN programme-oriented discussion to certain sessions could have the advantage of freeing NGOs from their current consultative status role of « followers » commenting on minor details of UN defined programmes. Some of the informal multi-meeting sessions should permit NGOs to recover their pioneering spirit and to discuss new initiatives which could later¹⁰ take the form of UN programmes.
- grouping the consultative status conferences physically should reduce the time and funds which NGOs have to spend on representation at meeting in different locations.
- the loose framework in which **programme-oriented** sessions can be organised, means that only those NGOs interested in the subject under discussion need attend.
- the multi-meeting can be held in different cities in successive years since there is less justification to relate it to the Secretariat of the Agency of the consultative status conference. (On this point, the last ECOSOC/NGO meeting in Geneva was held in the **1LO** building). NGOs should not ignore the possible financial and other advantages which they can derive from government and city administrations anxious to encourage individual NGO conferences in a given country or city by partially subsidizing multi-meetings in their own cities. This would also help to increase public understanding of NGOs in each such city.
- the multi-meeting environment should lead to a much improved exchange of information between all Secretariats of NGO Conferences and Committees whether specifically concerned with the consultative status machinery or not
- the multi-meeting permits NGOs to work out a solution to their problem of regular contacts, particularly between :
 - Secretariats of the formal « permanent » NGO groups and the secretaries of temporary or ad hoc groups

- Conference Secretariats and Agency Secretariats
- Conference Secretariats and NGOs
- NGOs and NGOs
- NGOs and Agency Secretariats.

A first step towards this might be an information service at the reception desk to permit NGOs to register topics in which they are interested with a view to contacting other NGOs, and possibly arranging a small meeting within the multi-meeting framework. New activities are in this way facilitated.

- Conference Secretariats might enter into reciprocity agreements with regard to representation of NGO members at Specialized Agencies or meetings in the cities in which they are based. This could be particularly important with respect to regional activity (e.g. African or Asian Conference Secretariats).

The disadvantages of the multi-meeting technique derive mainly from the problems of organizing adequate meeting space with simultaneous interpretation. Nevertheless, such practical aspects are surmountable and more manageable than the semi-political/procedural/autonomy problems which arise if significant formal changes to the consultative arrangement machinery are considered.

In addition, a dynamic environment of this kind, in which more new people from the national level can each year be involved in international activity, is surely a desirable NGO goal.

It should be remembered that the plenary sessions of the main NGO Conferences, together or separately, are by no means large meetings when compared to the average international congress. It may be that the usual five day meeting period would be insufficient even with some sessions run in parallel — but this must be offset against the number of additional, possibly evening, meeting sessions which could benefit from the multi-meeting framework (*). An Indication of the subjects discussed by some of the NGO groupings and the degree to which these coincide is given in the inset on page 357.

Recommendation

- that representatives of the NGO (UNESCO) Standing Committee and the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status with ECOSOC, together with representatives of their respective UN bodies, meet to discuss the possibility of holding their Conferences within a common multi-meeting framework ; these to take place in 1972;
- that this recommendation be transmitted to

(*) A table has been prepared showing the extent to which NGOs have multiple overlapping membership of several UN Agencies (see page 358).

the Bureau of the ECOSOC Conference for consideration and that the Secretariats of the other NGO groupings be invited to comment on these suggestions.

Submitted by Informal Group of
London-based NGOs.
London, February 11th 1971.

Examples of subjects being discussed by more than one UN NGO group

Youth

- Unesco/NGO Working Party on Youth and Society (this working party has set up a sub-group on education and employment in the context of the Second Development Decade — what is the contact between this group and the ILO ?)
- Informal group of Youth NGOs meeting with the UN Inter-Agency Youth Liaison Officer
- FFHC Young World Promotion Group
- FFHC national seminars on Youth programmes
- Second World Food Congress discussed an item on the Role of Youth in Development.
- Unicef/NGO Committee to consider encouraging the strengthening of bilateral and multi-national aid programmes of economically advanced countries in relation to service for children and youth ; the development of public understanding ; the needs of children and youth.

Peace

- Unesco/NGO Working Party on Peace, International Understanding and Cooperation in the Second Development Decade

- ECOSOC/NGO Special Committee on Disarmament-

Development

- ECOSOC/NGO Special Committee on the Second Development Decade
- Unesco/NGO Sub-group on Education and Employment (see above under Youth)
- Unesco/NGO Working Party on Peace, International Understanding and Cooperation in the Second Development Decade
- Unicef/NGO Committee to consider providing direct services to children and youth in developing countries in a co-ordinated way with Unicef, thus making possible more effective use of available resources and more strategic attacks on the priority problems of children and youth in the context of national development.
- FFHC Young World Development Programme.

Audio-visual media

- Unesco/NGO audio-visual Working Party
- the 4th FFHC Conference discussed audio-visual techniques in relation to rural education ; and mass communications media at the service of development.

NGO Interdependence and Isolationism

Some UAI comments on the above proposal.

Most reports circulating at the international level, and most international conferences, stress repeatedly the importance of collective activity. A recent meeting of NGO's in consultative status with UNESCO, discussed the shortsightedness of governmental thinking on NGO activities with respect to NGOs and racism as typified by the UNESCO plenary resolution in 1970 requiring UNESCO to cut off contact with all NGOs with branches in South Africa by December of 1971. « What we do say is that Unesco should not associate itself with NGOs which are active in South Africa, » Tanzanian Delegate, 16 C/V.R. 32 (prov), p. 34.

And yet at this very same NGO meeting, one NGO representative stated, with reference to the possible collaboration with « non-UNESCO » NGOs in consultative status with other UN agencies, « We don't

have anything in common with them » Other NGO representatives and the representative of the UNESCO Secretariat agreed.

This comment raises a very fundamental question. At a point in time when the United Nations system is starting to recognize that every problem, and particularly development problems, is related to every other problem, when is it valid for one organization to assert that it has nothing to do with another organization ? Are NGOs now trailing behind the United Nations in the belief that each Specialized Agency deals with a neat group of problems unrelated to those handled by a second Agency. The Jackson Report showed very clearly how the subject areas of the "Specialized Agencies overlapped. If this is so, then many NGOs in consultative status with one Agency should also have consultative relations with others in order to cover all aspects of the problem which interests them (e.g. education from the cultural (UNESCO), health (WHO, UNICEF), rural (FAO), and workers (ILO) points of view).

Table showing degree of overlap in consultative relations

Thus 46 % of the INGOs in consultative relations with ECOSOC (I or II) also have consultative relations with UNESCO (A or B). Alternatively, 132 INGOs have ECOSOC I or II status and of them 61 have UNESCO A or B consultative status. All percentages greater or equal to 30 % are in bold characters.

ECOSOC I/II	ECOSOC I/II	ECOSOC ROS	ILO	FAO 21 28	UNESCO A/B	UNES	WHO	ICAO	ITU	WMO	IMCO	IAEA	UNICEF	UNCTAD	UNIDO	COUNCIL OF EUROPE	of 11 14
	132		39 51		46 61	16 25	6 13 17	7 7 9	6 8	5 6	5 6	8 10	42 55	14 19	8 10	23 30	
ECOSOC		100	9	17	47	6	3	3	5	3	9	5	3	8	2		
Ros	—	235	21	39	111	9	58	13	7	6	11	6	21	12	7	18	4
ILO	55	23	100	26	51	12	16	2	1	3	5	8	42	11	7	33	7
	51	21	92	24	47	11	15	2	1	3	5	7	39	10	6	30	6
FAO	25	36	22	100	34	9	8	3	5	6	6	9	28	13	5	18	3
	28	39	24	107	36	10	9	3	5	6	6	10	30	14	5	19	3
UNESCO	35	64	27	21	100	—	11	2	4	4	3	5	27	5	3	15	5
A/B	61	111	47	36	175	—	20	4	7	7	5	8	48	9	5	26	9
UNESCO	21	9	11	10	—	100	5	1	3	2	1	2	10	5	3	17	4
C	21	9	11	10	—	100	5	1	3	2	1	2	10	5	3	17	4
WHO	21	72	19	11	25	6	100	1	4	4	—	6	28	3	1	9	1
	17	58	15	9	20	5	81	1	3	3	—	5	23	2	1	7	1
ICAO	32	46	7	11	14	4	4	100	25	14	21	11	—	14	4	—	—
	9	13	2	3	4	1	1	28	7	4	6	3	—	4	1	—	—
ITU	25	22	3	16	22	9	9	22	100	19	16	19	—	9	3	3	3
	8	7	1	5	7	3	3	7	32	6	5	6	—	3	1	1	1
WMO	40	40	20	40	47	13	20	27	40	100	13	27	13	20	—	13	—
	6	6	3	6	7	2	3	4	6	15	2	4	2	3	—	2	—
IMCO	29	53	24	29	24	5	—	29	24	100	24	10	43	14	10	—	—
	6	11	5	6	5	1	—	6	5	2	21	5	2	9	3	2	—
IAEA	59	32	37	53	42	11	26	15	32	21	26	100	21	32	15	21	—
	10	6	7	10	8	2	5	3	6	4	5	19	4	6	3	4	—
UNICEF	72	26	51	39	62	13	30	—	—	3	3	5	100	10	4	33	12
	55	21	39	30	48	10	23	—	—	2	2	4	77	8	3	25	9
UNCTAD	54	34	29	40	26	14	6	11	9	9	26	17	23	100	23	20	—
	19	12	10	14	9	5	2	4	3	3	9	6	8	35	8	7	—
UNIDO	63	44	38	31	31	19	6	6	6	—	19	19	19	50	100	31	6
	10	7	6	5	5	3	1	1	1	—	3	3	3	8	16	5	—
COUNCIL OF EUROPE	28	17	28	18	26	16	7	—	1	2	2	4	24	7	5	100	7
	30	18	30	19	26	17	7	—	i	2	2	4	25	7	5	106	7
OAS	30	9	13	7	20	9	2	—	2	—	—	—	20	2	2	15	100
	14	4	6	3	9	4	1	—	1	—	—	—	9	1	1	7	46

How can this overlapping of interests be illustrated to underline the dangerous nature of the comment cited above? After experimenting with a number of different approaches, the Table on this same page was produced. This can be used in the following way. NGOs in consultative status with a given Agency can look for that Agency in the left hand column of the Table. Each square across the Table

in the row corresponding to that Agency indicates the number of NGOs which also have consultative relations with another Agency (named in the row across the top of the Table). Thus in the case of the 175 NGOs with consultative status A or B with UNESCO : 61 (35 %) also have ECOSEC I or II, and III (64 %) with ECOSOC Roster 47 (27 %) with ILO, 36 (21 %) with FAO, 20 (11 %) with WHO 4 (2 %)

with ICAO, 7 (4%), 7 (4%) with WMO, 5 (3%) with IMCO, 8 (5 %) with IAEA, 48 (27 %) with UNICEF, 9 (5 %) with UNCTAD, 5 (3 %) with UNIDO, 26 (15%) with the Council of Europe, and 9 (5%) with the OAS.

Similarly 42 % of the 132 ECOSOC I or II NGOs have consultative status with UNICEF. 34 % of the 107 FAO NGOs have consultative status A or B with UNESCO. 62% of the 77 UNICEF NGOs have consultative status A or B with UNESCO. And so on. This type of information raises a very interesting question - with regard to the degree of justification required for cooperation between NGO groups. The comment cited above considered that UNESCO A/B NGOs had nothing in common with the other NGO groups — namely that a percentage of 100% in the above Table was essential before cooperation was conceivable. But the essence of international cooperation is contact between groups with different but related fields of concern. When, for example, does it become justifiable to organize an international meeting or some sort of federation of national bodies ? Only when all potential participants agree or are concerned with exactly the same thing ? Each of the national bodies of a world wide association does not have the same perspective or priorities, but when does this justify one group saying of the other « we have nothing in common with them » ? Just how different do they have to be to be rejected — or how similar to be accepted ? Is cooperation possible when the participating bodies are 80 % similar - 60 % ? - 40 % ? - 30 % ? When should the possibility of cooperation be excluded ?

It should be possible for one group of NGOs to conceive of some joint activity with another group if 50 % of the NGOs belong to both groups. But again what if only 30 % belong to both groups ? Each of the bodies represented at an international meeting is not equally concerned with every item on the agenda and may even consider many to be of no significance - but when does this justify setting up a separate meeting ? And what arguments do the central committees use in the case

of the organization and the meeting to show the extent of common interest and justify a single joint activity — how common does the interest have to be ? This is a consideration that each NGO must face with respect to its own members and potential members in different countries.

This question may be approached from another angle. How many NGOs with a common interest are necessary before a viable working group is formed ? In the case of the UNESCO A/B NGOs, a working group of :

— 10 NGOs represents 6% of the total in consultative status A or B

— 20 NGOs represents 12 %

In the case of ECOSOC I/II NGOs, a working group of :

— 10 NGOs represents 8 % of the total consultative status I or II.

— 20 NGOs represents 15 %.

Now the working groups of both the ECOSOC and UNESCO NGO Conferences do not often succeed 20-30 NGOs. It would therefore appear that a figure of 15-20 % is an acceptable basis for cooperation, in the estimation of active NGOs. Yet another approach to the study of the limits within which international cooperation is justifiable is to consider the number of NGOs actually attending the NGO Conferences as compared to the number which could attend. In the case of ECOSOC NGOs, for example :

— 91 NGOs were present at the 11th Conference (1969), representing 25% of those which were entitled to attend

— 127 NGOs are in fact members of the ECOSOC NGO Conference, namely 35 % of those which are entitled to be members.

(Presumably 65 % of the NGOs entitled to be members consider that they have « nothing in common » with the 35 % which are members). Is the current period of social crisis a time for NGOs to be more exclusive or less exclusive ? How small must the percentage of common interest be before the possibility of international cooperation should be excluded ?

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La croûte Angèle

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