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Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization

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Identification of new subjects

Challenges to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations arising from initiatives promoting enhanced non-governmental organization participation in the work of the United Nations

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Introduction

In accordance with the mandate outlined in General Assembly resolution [3499 \(XXX\)](#) of 15 December 1975, the Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization is tasked with considering specific proposals from Governments to enhance the ability of the United Nations to achieve its purposes. In fulfilling this mandate, the Special Committee must address challenges to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations arising from initiatives promoting strengthened non-governmental organization (NGO) participation in the work of the United Nations.

The idea of having more robust participation of civil society in the Organization is not accurate, as NGOs are already participating in relevant United Nations meetings and processes. Nevertheless, a diverse participation of NGOs is not possible in practice, as factors inherent to the nature of NGOs may significantly contribute to cementing inequalities between the developed and developing world, adversely affecting the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, including but not limited to the sovereign equality of States, non-interference in domestic affairs, the promotion of social progress and better standards of life, as well as cooperation in solving international problems.



Non-governmental organizations deepen global inequalities

The phenomenon of NGOs is not as universal as portrayed. Historically, “civil society organizations” have originated in rich and powerful developed countries as a traditional tool for lobbying. For decades, large businesses used NGOs as a vehicle to make their interests known to political authorities, avoiding corruption and bribery charges, and camouflaging power struggles with rival companies as an “aspiration for the greater good”.

As sponsoring corporations grew in size and influence, surpassing national borders, so did the NGOs supported by them. Nowadays, some of the oldest Western NGOs and funds, owing to their historically close ties with big businesses, can boast budgets easily exceeding the regular budget of the United Nations. None of the non-Western homegrown civil society organizations can come close to such parameters for a simple reason: NGOs do not participate in the creation of any economic goods. Thus, only countries with excess resources, large economies and specific traditions of interaction between political and economic elites can incubate such an instrument. In simple terms, large NGOs, which do not produce any tangible economic benefit, but rather consume considerable amounts of resources to maintain their daily operations, are a tool that the developing world cannot afford.

In non-Western countries, there are no obvious sponsors for such organizations domestically. If philanthropists come from rich countries overseas, the question naturally arises: whose interests would the “civil society organization” in question be promoting in reality? The same applies to local “branch offices” of global or Western NGOs, who sometimes try to mimic “grass-roots organizations” but, in fact, serve as proxies for transnational corporations and foreign governments, interfering heavily with domestic affairs for their very particular economic and political interests having nothing in common with “the greater good”.

Initiatives promoting strengthened non-governmental organization participation pose challenges to the United Nations and its Charter

As demonstrated above, reinforcing NGO participation in United Nations work will mean giving even more power to the already powerful few that are not accountable to the intergovernmentally-agreed rules and regulations governing their participation in the work of the Organization. “Civil society organizations” backed by businesses and transnational corporations from developed countries have a numerical advantage and better access to resources, technology and expertise. All that, coupled with advanced and expensive public relations and communications strategies, extensive global mass media and social network coverage, allows them to project more influence on United Nations policies compared with any civil society actors originating from developing countries.

The financial burden of participating in United Nations processes, including travel expenses associated with attending various conferences and meetings, is more challenging for organizations from developing countries, limiting their engagement and allowing Western NGOs with wealthy sponsors to shape and monopolize agendas. As a result of these disparities, the focus of United Nations agencies relying too much on NGO opinions often shifts towards issues prioritized by Western nations, leading to a disproportionate allocation of resources, leaving critical concerns of developing countries underaddressed.

Thus, initiatives promoting more robust “civil society” participation in the work of the United Nations have nothing to do with democratization or transparency but are designed to amplify the voices of wealthier nations in the Organization, contrary to the principle of sovereign equality of States. Such dynamics would cement

historical legacies of colonialism and neocolonial economic structures, contributing to an inherent bias in favour of Western interests within the United Nations.

Western-backed NGOs have strong networks and connections with and within United Nations agencies, enabling them to influence priorities and strategies. In the Organization, they perform the same lobbying activities as domestically in the interests of their sponsors, sidelining the priorities of developing nations. Resource disparity leads to the dominance of Western and Western-backed NGOs among those who participate in technical assistance projects. This, in turn, leads to the promotion of Western-centric models and solutions that are often not suitable or effective in addressing the unique challenges faced by developing countries. Moreover, such NGOs providing respective services often grossly interfere with the domestic affairs of the assisted State, regarding themselves as not being bound by United Nations rules and regulations.

However, the principles of sovereign equality of States and non-interference in domestic affairs are not the only ones from among the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations affected by disparities and inequalities inherent to the nature of NGOs. Other instances may include, for example, “cooperation in solving international problems”: Western-backed NGOs with superior access to resources, information and decision-making processes are successful in shaping agendas and imposing within the United Nations models of cooperation benefiting their sponsors. The same factors may also thwart the “evaluation of social progress and the definition of better standards of life” (by sidelining the priorities of developing nations), as well as the promotion of economic, social, cultural and educational cooperation (by promoting Western-centred models insensitive to unique regional and national needs, priorities and specificities).

In addition, NGOs are not contributing to the United Nations budget, are not signatories to the Charter of the United Nations and do not bear the respective obligations. Representatives of the Member States serve their respective peoples. Representatives of NGOs, on the contrary, answer only to their sponsors, whose business and geopolitical interests are much more specific than the vague “serving the greater good”.

Any broadening of already significant NGO participation in the work of the United Nations would raise serious challenges, reinforcing international and regional disparities and inequalities, to the detriment of the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and of the intergovernmental processes within the United Nations.

Conclusions and recommendations for the Special Committee

It is crucial to design procedural and organizational solutions to address the various aspects related to the participation of NGOs in United Nations bodies and to prevent this participation from being used to promote politicization, selective and punitive approaches, in benefit of national agendas from a few developed countries. Such a procedure ought to guarantee that the intergovernmental nature of the United Nations is not undermined and that the participation of NGOs is in accordance with the rules of procedure of the General Assembly and is not misused to serve the narrow interests of a few countries.

Procedures need to be put in place to ensure fair and equitable geographical representation among NGOs participating in United Nations processes, particularly representing the unaddressed views and unheard voices from non-Western countries. The Member States shall have full control of the processes allowing NGO participation, in compliance with the Charter of the United Nations, Economic and

Social Council resolution 1996/31, the decisions of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations and other relevant resolutions.

There are currently no appropriate mechanisms in place to hold NGOs accountable for their abuse of the United Nations system and related processes, or for the misuse of their consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. Such a situation needs to be addressed. Finding proper solutions to the challenges enumerated above will be a mandatory preliminary condition for considering any action on suggestions contained in the report entitled "Our Common Agenda" promoting reinforced participation of NGOs in the work of the United Nations.

The Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations is a proper forum for examining the problem and discussing effective ways of dealing with it.
