UNRISD Research and Policy Brief 6

UN World Summits and Civil Society Engagement

UN summits and related processes can have highly positive—but not always sustainable—impacts on civil society structure, networking and advocacy in countries that have hosted such events, according to UNRISD research.

The Issue

While the United Nations (UN) remains an intergovernmental organization, an increase in the number of influential civil society actors has placed new pressures on the organization to accommodate popular voices and further enhance collaboration. The link with civil society actors has been growing since the early 1990s in particular, in the context of UN summits and conferences, and related processes. Civil society organizations (CSOs) have amplified their demands on the UN with regard to information, access and participation in these global events. And the UN has recognized the importance of accommodating the demands of CSOs for a greater voice and role in development processes.

UN summits and the resulting action plans offer opportunities for CSOs to lobby delegates and the media in support of their ideas and projects, and to adapt a summit theme as an integral part of their own work. There is also scope for civil society actors to advance proposals, and to help implement and monitor summit agendas.

But what do such opportunities for civil society engagement really mean? Given that CSOs tend to differ in their perceptions of and approaches to international institutions—depending, for example, on ideologies, philosophies or strategies adopted to bring about social transformation—what have been the effects on the structure of civil society at the national level? While many CSOs seem to have chosen to take such opportunities

Box 1: UNRISD Research

UNRISD carried out a project on UN World Summits and Civil Society Engagement between 2003 and 2005, to assess the way and extent to which different civil society actors used the opportunities created by UN summits and related processes. The research focused, first, on the degree to which these events created a favourable political space at the national level that facilitated the further emergence and consolidation of CSOs. Second, it examined the range and quality of civil society activities and, in particular, whether subsequent to such events, the overall vibrancy could be said to have increased at the national level. Third, it looked at the stimulus created by UN summits and related processes for greater linkages among CSOs, both horizontally (with other national CSOs) and vertically (with regional and international CSOs).

The research began with an examination of the available literature, resulting in the publication of a background paper and a state-of-the art paper. A project meeting was held in Rio de Janeiro in September 2003 with the objective of discussing the key concepts involved, identifying principal research gaps and establishing a common methodological framework. Parallel to this, a thematic study was undertaken to explore the various efforts of the UN system to develop proactive strategies to strengthen cooperation with civil society during the summits and their follow-up, including the different constraints encountered (see Further Reading).

Literature analyses and discussions at the methodology meeting in Rio indicated that UNRISD research could usefully concentrate on the national dynamics in selected countries holding UN conferences, summits and preparatory meetings. Using multiple methods, such as the analysis of published and unpublished materials on national legal frameworks and relevant government policies and practices regarding CSOs; surveys of a representative number of CSOs with significant experience in national advocacy and networking, and regular participation in such UN events; and appraisals of selected programmes or project initiatives that emerged subsequent to such events and in which the civil society sector was expected to participate, the research attempted to analyse the varying degrees of impact of UN summits and related processes on the national civil society structure, networking and advocacy.

Table 1: Countries/Events Studied

Country	Event	Number of CSO participants in official activities	Number of CSO participants in parallel forums
Brazil	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992)	2,400 CSO representatives	17,000 participants
Chile	World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance—Regional PrepCom for the Americas (Santiago, 2000)	328 accredited CSOs	1,700 participants
China	Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995)	1,761 accredited CSOs	31,549 participants (26,549 overseas participants and 5,000 Chinese participants)
Indonesia	World Summit on Sustainable Development—PrepCom IV (Bali, 2002)	391 accredited CSOs	1,000 participants
Senegal	Fourth World Conference on Women—Fifth African Regional Conference on Women (Dakar, 1994)	Not available	4,000 participants
South Africa	World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Durban, 2001)	1,228 CSOs not in consultative status with ECOSOC	8,000 participants
	World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002)	8,096 individuals from 925 CSOs	25,000 participants

Sources: Based on national studies; the following United Nations General Assembly documents: A/CONF.189/12, A/CONF.189/PC.2/7, A/CONF.199/PC/20 available at http://documents.un.org/simple.asp; and the following internet sites: www.johannesburgsummit.org/, www.gdrc.org/ngo/attendee, and www.unhchr.ch/html/racism/05-ngolist.html (accessed in October 2006).

to work within the system for change by directly participating, other more radical groups refuse engagement. Yet even they may find the UN summits a useful platform for advocating their points of view before a wide audience.

Research Findings

Brazil, Chile, China, Indonesia, Senegal and South Africa, which have held important UN summits, conferences or preparatory meetings (prepcoms), were chosen to appraise the impact of these events on civil society at the national level (see table 1).[1] As can be expected, there exist many variations among the six case study countries in relation to legal and political norms, processes of economic reform and integration into the world economy, evolving social perceptions, configuration and historical strength of national civil society, and so forth.

Concerning the impact of a specific summit or prepcom, differentiations can be observed with regard to the actual timing and topic of the event, as well as the specific sector of civil society concerned and its internal composition, capacity and interest to collaborate with the government, UN system and donor agencies. Overall, the structure of the state, notably democratic setting, has greatly influenced civil society activism. Taking into consideration these diverse aspects, the principal research findings emerging from national studies are presented below.

Impacts on the national political space

World summits and prepcom activities enhanced the dynamism of civil society in the countries hosting such events. Table 2 shows the potential for participation of CSOs at various stages of a typical summit. CSOs tend to participate most actively in expert seminars, and national and regional conferences. In addition to their involvement in a summit's formal events, since the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), many CSOs have also participated in parallel, popular civil society forums.

Thus CSOs used the political space created by both formal and non-formal events to advance their claims and proposals. The broader democratization processes taking place in the majority of the case study countries further reinforced the position, visibility and vitality of CSOs.

In the case of Brazil in 1992, for example, UNCED occurred in a context of ongoing political and civic activism. The process of re-democratization was marked by attempts to reconquer broader civil rights and ensure their application, thus providing the institutional foundations on which to base activism around such issues as political ethics, eradication of hunger and agrarian reform. UNCED gave visibility to Brazilian CSOs and to their diverse perceptions of and proposals for resolving such key development issues. This diversity was not free of tension, however, especially with regard to the level of reform considered acceptable among various CSO groups, and the level of collaboration to be sought with formal institutions.

In 2000, the Regional PrepCom for the Americas for the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance took place in Santiago, Chile, in a context where democratic processes were also being consolidated with an important part of civil society—especially NGOs—actively collaborating with the state. But the need for financial resources to maintain basic organizational activities often meant that CSOs lost some measure of political independence vis-à-vis the state, and also created tensions between those CSOs working with the government and those seeking to function outside its structures. Despite this situation, the prepcom provided an important arena for debating the fabric of Chilean society, in general, and for granting public visibility

[1] Hereafter, "summit" is used to refer to both summits and special conferences.

Table 2: The Various Processes of UN Summits and CSO Participation

Time frame (years)	Stages of preparation	Nature of CSO involvement
3 years prior to the summit	General Assembly agrees to hold a UN summit	
	Preparatory Committee I	
2 years prior to the summit	Expert seminars	Inputs from CSOs sought by the summit's organizers
	Regional conferences of Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe	CSOs tend to participate actively in regional conferences
I year prior to the summit	Summit secretariat synthesizes the outcomes of regional conferences and expert seminars	
	Preparatory Committee 2	
	Preparatory Committee 3	
Year of the summit	Holding of the UN world summit	
	Action-oriented summit: Plan of Action and declaration with preamble **or** Rule-making summit: Legal document	CSOs are most active
	National follow-up process	CSOs are expected to participate
	UN follow-up process	
5 or 10 years after the summit	+5 or +10 meeting	CSOs are usually involved

to certain civil society groups, in particular. For instance, the event helped to increase national attention on the community of African descendants as well as reinforce its organizational capacity, although momentum gradually diminished following the prepcom, primarily due to dispersed demands and lack of financial resources. Despite activism and mobilization by the movement for the rights of sexual minorities, the prepcom did not have significant impacts for these groups. Even though certain legislative changes were introduced, they were more the consequence of the movement's years of struggle rather than the impact of this single event. As far as the position and interests of migrant women were concerned, there was no specific impact either, although the immigration issue received heightened public attention in subsequent years. Finally, Chilean indigenous groups, especially the Mapuches, participated only marginally in the parallel Citizens' Forum, because they felt that the event was primarily destined for smaller minority groups.

In Senegal, the holding of the Fifth African Regional Conference on Women in Dakar in 1994 added dynamism to national civil society, which was based on a long associative tradition and on left-wing political movements. Despite constraints, some important headway was made in the fight for gender equality in Senegal following the Dakar and Beijing conferences. CSOs were able to frame the international feminist political discourse in the national context, and were able to influence the formulation of government policy on gender. CSOs became an essential partner for the implementation of various government gender programmes, as well as wider development activities. However, CSOs faced the difficult task of remaining autonomous from the government, while maintaining a coherent ideological and political strategy in line with their social struggles.

The organization of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in Durban in 2001 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002 had major impacts on South African civil society. Within a few years following the fall of the apartheid regime and the consolidation of the African National Congress government, it became clear that the social conditions of a vast majority of the population had yet to improve and that the government was readily adapting neoliberal economic policies with important consequences for public spending and social welfare.

The WCAR and WSSD were seized upon by much of South African civil society as a space to mobilize around, and to debate not only summit topics, but also these wider issues of concern. While certain trade unions, civic organizations and political parties participated in the events, others chose to mount counter-mobilizations outside the event venues. While this division was latent in the case of the WCAR, it became manifest in the preparatory process for, as well as during the holding of, the WSSD. Many South African CSOs, for example, expressed the opinion that sustainable development was impossible within a neoliberal economic system and that participating in these conferences lent legitimacy to related policies. The confrontation of these positions marked the divisions within and among the new social movements, within and among NGOs, within the South African National NGO Coalition, and between the latter and other movements.

The Bali Preparatory Committee for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which took place in Indonesia in 2002, four years after the fall of the Suharto regime, proved, for the most part, to be an important consolidation opportunity. Many CSOs attended the prepcom, especially the parallel Indonesian People's Forum (IPF). The Indonesian government made the IPF a member of the national committee responsible for the organization of the prepcom, as well as allowing a representative of the IPF to join the official summit delegation. This helped to change the popular perception of sustainable development as merely an issue of economic performance, and to emphasize instead the importance of managing conflicts and diverse interests, and finding a collaborative approach

between the government and civil society. However, the legacy of the past regime, characterized by corporatist and clientelistic power structures, had made it difficult to implement the principles of sustainable development, including the participatory approach of collaboration initially conceived between the government and civil society.

The research concerning the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), held in Beijing in 1995, revealed a significant impact in terms of raising public and government awareness on gender issues, as well as the broader development of civil society in China. Even though this was closely related to the wider processes of economic reform, development of a market economy, gradual separation of civil society from the state, and growth of the Chinese middle-class, the FWCW helped to raise the profile of gender issues in the national development agenda. It magnified the efforts made by such organizations as the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) in the area of women's welfare and their position in society. The government began to perceive the importance of the views and work of these bodies, facilitating certain legal changes and consultative processes, as well as allowing them greater autonomy in their work. At the same time, institutionalizing these practices did not prove easy and the government has required women's organizations to function within existing political parameters.

Impacts on the range and quality of civil society activities

The principal issue of interest here was to assess whether participation in UN summits and related processes intensified CSO mobilization, especially involving long-term advocacy and lobbying activities. Did CSOs take on a more prominent role vis-à-vis national authorities, the UN system and donor agencies, with the ability to provide inputs in public policy formulation, implementation and monitoring?

CSOs commonly sought to influence national delegates by proposing concrete improvements to national strategy reports and other formal documents. However, their actual influential capacity varied from country to country, depending upon the nature of national civil society and the political context.

In the case of UNCED, for example, as the Brazilian NGOs were still in a phase of consolidation, the event proved to be more of a learning process. In Chile, Fundación Ideas,

the institution responsible for organizing the Citizens' Forum, was an important catalyst for links between CSOs and official bodies through the organization of meetings, debates on formal documents and the expression of concrete policy ideas. The principal CSO networks attempted to influence national delegates, namely, in the cases of Senegal and South Africa. In Indonesia, a representative of the IPF was included in the formal delegation to the Johannesburg summit. In China, bodies like the ACWF were invited to provide contributions to and suggestions on key official documents.

It was often parallel events, such as NGO meetings, citizen forums and protest rallies, that had significant impacts. Official policy documents, such as the plan of action or other legal instruments that had been considered at formal sessions, were scrutinized. Alternative and more ambitious proposals coming from civil society were debated. And networks, social movements and grassroots organizations typically sought to influence the media and public opinion regarding their claims and alternative visions.

The research also considered the extent to which CSOs were able to influence the policy process during the post-summit period, especially their ability to stimulate citizen engagement in policy formulation, implementation and monitoring.

Here the findings suggest that the overall role of CSOs remained relatively weak, even though key national CSO networks in all case study countries continued to interact with the relevant government bodies and donor agencies to promote summit action plans. Overall, the voices of autonomous social movements and grassroots organizations remained muted: they faced difficulties in articulating their views and offering concrete proposals, as governments tended to draw a few—mainly government-affiliated CSOs—into narrow service delivery circuits, while neutralizing others.

Impacts on coalition building among CSOs

An important feature of the UN summits and related processes was their role in stimulating CSOs to build coalitions. But taking into account the heterogeneity of CSOs, how stable and consequential were these linkages? In particular, how did such events help them to build advocacy work at the macro and national levels? How did they contribute to CSO campaigns for the interests of local groups?

Box 2: From UNCED to the World Social Forum

It can be said that the strength and leadership of Brazilian civil society in organizing the World Social Forum (WSF) was a direct outcome of its experience at UNCED, notably the Global Citizens' Forum (GCF). First, the GCF helped to consolidate national connections among CSOs through the work of the Brazilian Forum of NGOs and Social Movements. Second, the experience of organizing the GCF as the first parallel citizens' forum at a UN world conference—hosting 17,000 representatives of 2,400 CSOs—was a significant political and logistical learning process. Third, the GCF functioned as an intermediary between the government and CSOs during and after UNCED, thereby garnering crucial support from the Brazilian government for the organization of the WSF in subsequent years. Fourth, the scale and volume of contacts produced by the GCF amplified relations between groups and movements at the international level, creating affinities and building bridges between different social actors, and attracting international public support for the holding of a regular event such as the WSF.

The possibility of forming alliances and articulating different proposals jointly and coherently with other organizations was one of the most important impacts of the UN summit processes.

At the national level, the preparatory activities for a conference usually constituted the first opportunity for local organizations to meet for the purpose of exchanging ideas, harmonizing general approaches and planning joint initiatives. This effort was then consolidated during the official summit and, especially, the parallel forums, thus making it possible to construct horizontal networks and coalitions.

The extent to which this occurred varied from country to country. In Brazil, Indonesia and Senegal, these events opened up significant spaces for constructing a common vision and developing stronger networks for popular action. Even in the case of China, activities around the FWCW helped to improve dialogue among key organizations responsible for promoting gender issues, thereby breaking the monopoly of a single quasi-governmental organization in the field and allowing small and regional organizations to build networks. In the case of South Africa, on the other hand, there was a clear division between those working with the government and those preferring to operate outside its influence, with numerous networking activities occurring between these poles.

During a summit, it was also feasible for national CSOs to make contacts with regional and international CSO networks—exchanges that were strengthened during the post-summit period. Intense relations were established at the regional level in particular. Attempts were also made to maintain links with solidarity campaigns, networks and social movements at the international level.

In the case of Brazilian civil society, the experience of organizing a parallel forum, combined with the ability to maintain contacts with regional and global networks, allowed a key national CSO network to become an influential protagonist in international civil society activism (see box 2).

In spite of these stimuli for activism and alliances among national, regional and international initiatives and networks, UNRISD research revealed that national CSOs eventually confronted two major problems: a rigid political and institutional structure, and a lack of financial sustainability. This resulted in horizontal divisions within national civil society, between those working with the government and those choosing to operate outside; between NGOs and social movements; and between those with international connections for funding and those without. As such, maintaining durable linkages among CSOs and mounting large-scale, long-term advocacy campaigns—in areas covered by summit agendas and action plans, or wider citizen interests—has proved to be an increasingly intricate endeavour in most countries, despite significant initial gains.

Lessons from the Research

■ **Popularizing important issues**

In all six countries, UN summit–related processes helped to popularize important issues, such as environmental degradation, gender inequality and racism. Many actors, including CSOs, found an increased voice during these events. Public perceptions concerning summit topics evolved, and awareness was raised concerning the need to promulgate favourable policies.

■ **Opening for political engagement**

There was a perceptible opening for civil society engagement with political processes shortly before, during and immediately after the summits. National legal frameworks had improved; official consultations with civil society had increased; and overall, governments seemed to recognize the value and role of civil society in addressing the issues raised by the summits.

■ **Enhancing links among civil society groups**

UN summit–related processes stimulated linkages among civil society groups. Local organizations managed to build ties with national networks; likewise, national organizations forged links with regional and international advocacy campaigns. Some organizations even attained prominence at the international level.

■ **Forces weakening CSO alliances**

CSO alliances and coalitions continued to function during the post-summit period, although they were sometimes weakened by increased competition for ideas, resources and contacts, as well as differing political perceptions and strategies.

■ **CSOs seen as service providers**

Political engagement of CSOs during the post-summit period proved complex. Governments sought to cope with many contending demands and priorities, often engaging with CSOs primarily as service providers in the context of official policies and programmes.

■ **Constraints on CSO activism**

The overall role of CSOs in stimulating citizen engagement in public policy formulation, implementation and monitoring during the post-summit period remained rather weak. A lack of adequate financial means also constrained the quality and sustainability of civil society activism during the post-summit period.

Further Reading

Background documents

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