

Statement of

Dr. Hanifa D. Mezoui, Chief  
NGO Section  
Department of Economic and Social Affairs  
United Nations

It is a great pleasure to be able to participate in this International Forum and to speak with you about the issues of partnership and the participation of non-governmental organizations in the challenge of development at the national, regional and international levels. I take this opportunity to warmly congratulate our host, the International Forum of Arabic Women, for its outstanding work and generous hospitality.

The spread of globalisation, emerging conflicts and the need for sustainable economies creates a new imperative for international dialogue, cooperation and partnerships. While globalization has brought opportunities for material progress to a number of middle income countries, poverty, vulnerability, environmental degradation and related social conflicts still pose serious obstacles to development in many countries. Armed conflict, civil war, escalating violence, foreign occupation and political instability are putting a brake on development in this and other regions.

If countries are to reap the benefits of globalization and modern economies, the task of public policy must be to preserve and advance important social, cultural and environmental values. In this sense, the demands of globalization and the Millennium Development Goals, magnify the importance of government policy and international cooperation. To succeed in dealing with these challenges, we need stable and predictable governance that includes widespread civic participation and partnerships at different levels of society. This implies a vision of governance that integrates, rather than further fragments, public policies, actions and institutions. It means a "whole of government" approach that fully incorporates the values of civil society and non-governmental organizations in decision-making.

The involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other civil society groups is an established fact of life in the United Nations as we meet today. UN Conferences and negotiating sessions of major international treaties are now routinely attended by scores of citizen's groups from all over the globe. Through mechanisms set in place by the Economic and Social Council, we have clearly recognized procedures and processes for interacting with the non-governmental organizations that help to ensure the inputs of civil society into our deliberations. We fully expect that this partnership with civil society will continue to grow in the years ahead.

This is not to say that the relationship between international organizations and representatives of civil society is always an easy one. A variety of problems still remain. A few governments still object to the participation of citizen's groups in the international context because they see international treaties and institutions as agreements between sovereign nations. International negotiations, in the past, have been closed to public participation and access to official documents has frequently been restricted. The legitimacy of some NGOs have also been questioned, at times. Some countries have also reacted negatively when it appeared that they were being held up to public criticism by groups based in countries other than their own. Also, in many cases, only the most well-funded groups from developed countries got to be heard at the international level.

There are also some obvious inequalities in terms of access to information. NGOs located in developed countries, for example, have easier access to information about the UN and other international processes than do NGOs in developing countries. Unfortunately, the information super highway, is still under construction in many countries of the world. The Internet is a great opportunity for some, but leaves behind many communities that are active and interested, but who don't have the funds to be connected. One day, the Internet will no doubt electronically encompass the globe and be a great force for open and equitable participation and partnerships. For now, we have to make special efforts to ensure that those who have not yet realized its benefits get the information they need to participate on an even footing with others.

But, there are many areas where NGOs are playing a significant role, such as human rights and the environment, among others. The ability to advocate critically for the enforcement of standards and norms has led to NGO success in the human rights area. For example, the International Women's Rights Action Watch has been very effective in promoting use of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Nevertheless, women around the world, at every socio-economic level, find themselves under-represented in parliaments and government and often far removed from decision-making levels. Women's political participation has two important dimensions: the proportion of women in decision making and the inclusion of women's perspectives in local, national and international policies and programs. Although the Beijing Platform of Action affirmed that women should have at least a 30% share of decision making positions, women have not yet reached this level in most of the world's legislatures. The percentage of women representatives is 10% or less in over half of the world's countries. Representation of women reached its highest level in Sweden at 43%, but in the majority of countries, women are persistently under-represented.

Several of the Magreb countries have made progress, however. For example, in Tunisia the principle of gender equality under the law is established in constitutional and legislative texts. Morocco, for its part, has a new family code that was adopted by the parliament in January 2004 and in Algeria, women's social progress is characterized by new perceptions that women have of themselves and by positive developments in the job market, particularly in the medical profession, the upper administration and the private sector.

NGOs, particularly in the women's movement, are important partners for the United Nations, which has made special efforts to give a voice to NGOs from all over the world. NGOs have played key roles in promoting change in many parts of the world, both for changes in policies and for changes in legislation. In many cases, they have been instrumental in changing public opinion regarding gender equality and the status of women. NGOs have made effective contributions regarding issues tackled at the Commission on the Status of Women and to international deliberations on issues of equality, development and peace, which we know, are not exclusive to women.

Through the International Forum of Arabic Women, you have the opportunity to forge new partnerships, within the region. It is only through a network of organizations and interest groups like yours, that we can make real progress in achieving goals to eliminate poverty, end conflict and ensure the well-being of people throughout the region. In this context, I would like to encourage your Forum to apply for the Non Governmental Organizations Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

Interaction and partnerships between NGOs, governments and the corporate sector although historically somewhat uneasy, is proving to be highly dynamic and evolving rapidly. At present two distinct approaches are taking shape. At one end of the spectrum, some NGOs continue to pursue a confrontational approach, applying a wide range of campaign strategies such as provocation, consumer boycotts, litigation and direct protest. At the other end, a growing number of NGOs, including some of the largest international organizations, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and others, have entered strategic partnership with multinational corporations recognizing that corporations can become effective role models or advocates for broader societal concerns.

While the ability to mobilize popular support around specific issues is important, NGOs, in addition, have come to be accepted as legitimate representatives, reflecting the sentiments of people from a wide variety of backgrounds, occupations and interests. NGOs are an important

barometer against which companies can test public opinion and evaluate the social impact of their business decisions. For example, companies such as British Petroleum, Royal Dutch/Shell and Rio Tinto Zinc have been working actively with NGOs to perform environmental impact studies related to key investment decisions in new markets around the world. No company wants to risk the displeasure of its consumers, or be forced to implement expensive and unforeseen asset protection measures, when citizens or their representatives object, sometimes violently, to its activities.

Another area where NGOs have played a role is in working with corporations to improve their ethical practices. Dealing with labor markets in some emerging economies, for example, often presents complexities which many corporations find difficult to deal with given their relative lack of familiarity with local realities. In many countries, popular opinion is adamantly opposed to multinational corporations. Profit-focused management has led to "Fat cat" allegations being levied at company directors. Governments are being required to consider legislation to regulate corporate activities in response to such claims. By working with NGOs, companies can discover ways of addressing community concerns, while at the same time ensuring that the benefits of proposed investment are more widely shared in the recipient economy. Thus, NGOs have an important role to play in advising and working with companies on the programs that will enable them to fulfill perceived social obligations.

One of the initiatives taken by my office is to strengthen the role of NGOs in developing countries and to further their participation at the international level through the establishment of the UN NGO-Informal Regional Network (IRENE). Launched in April 2001 in Curitiba, Brazil, UN NGO-Informal Regional Network is designed to strengthen the capacity of non-governmental organizations to contribute to economic and social development by broadening their access to information and communications technologies, building their capacities to participate in operational activities as well as policy formulation. At the regional level the NGO-Informal Regional Network is being supported through the intermediary activities of designated organizations in consultative status with ECOSOC that have recognized standing within a particular area of expertise.

Five such organizations have been identified including in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Western Europe and other states. Other such coordinating organizations will be added as the system is developed in the individual regions. Moreover, the interest sparked by the concept of the NGO-Informal Regional Network has attracted a number of UN and other intergovernmental and international bodies to join in partnership with the NGO Section/DESA as informal partners in its implementation. There is need in the Middle Eastern region for a

comprehensive needs assessment of Arab NGOs to help break down the relative isolation in which these organizations now work and strengthen their ability to contribute to the global civil society movement and to form partnerships with other groups within their own region.

Madame Chairperson, I would like close by recalling how interconnected we all are, despite what seem to be insurmountable divisions. We are all tied together in an intricate web of social, cultural, economic and ecological relationships that shape our lives and those of people all over the globe, including generations not yet born. Peace, freedom and development need to be given concrete reality by the actions of governments, non-governmental organizations and committed people in every locality and region of the world. This calls for a new ethic of global responsibility, an ethic of responsibility that must permeate every level of public and private life. It is an ethic that I know you here advocate and practice; and I wish you every success in your efforts.