

WCAR NGO Forum

Analysis from the Organisational Point of View

Procedures, Manipulations, Prejudices and Misunderstandings

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[1. Preparatory process](#)

NGOs were invited for the preparations of the WCAR and its NGO Forum since the 1st PrepCom in May 2000 in Geneva. The first problems occurred already there: the UNO (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights) invited all anti-racist NGOs of the world but neither reimbursed their travel costs nor contributed to their accommodation cost in Geneva. By this, many NGOs were practically prevented from attending - especially those from the 2nd and 3rd world. From about 250 NGO delegates present there were some 50 US-based ones but only two from the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). African NGOs were almost exclusively represented by their people living and/or working in Geneva.

The UN-NGO Liaison Unit suggested to set up an NGO steering committee to manage the preparations on behalf of the NGOs (as was the case in Beijing 1995). This idea was outright rejected by the present NGOs. There were much more conflicting issues and mistrust among the NGOs than in the women's or environmental movements. Anti-racist and human-rights NGOs did not want to be managed or steered. After a week of very tough and chaotic negotiations, a broad open structure was set up. This structure consisted of a larger global political decision-making body, the Co-ordinating Committee (CC). It has 63 seats representing all regions and constituencies, and a small Facilitating Team (FT) charged exclusively with technical tasks (therefore there was no need of representativity), consisting of 12 persons. Because everyone was aware that it would not be legitimate to elect the members of the two bodies, some posts were not filled and left open for those (sub)regions not properly represented at that meeting in Geneva.

The other persons were elected in Geneva only ad interim. It was decided that all regions should elect or appoint their proper delegates by the 1st November 2000. No region did this in time. Europe was able to announce its delegates on the 21st December whilst some other constituencies elected only their representatives during the 2nd PrepCom in the end of May 2001.

This was the key argument for the Liaison Office and SANGOCO (charged with the task to form the Secretariat of the NGO Forum in January 2001) to refuse the whole NGO structure as too big to communicate with and inflexible. They rejected the idea of a big political body and insisted to transform the non-political Facilitating Team into a political decision-making body, the NGO International Steering Committee (ISC). They had a strong argument: funds were made available for two meetings of the ISC only, there were no funds for the CC. Some NGOs from the 3rd World rejected the whole structure - they did not consider it legitimate because it was set up at the 1st PrepCom in their (forced) absence.

Of course, all this meant that the ISC had to be set up from point zero because now it became THE political body and thus different constituencies insisted to be represented in it. The ISC

membership increased to 20 while the only criterion was to be the delegate of a region or constituency - no organisational or political skills were required. The last seats in ISC were filled at the 3rd PrepCom only (at the end of July - one month before the start of the event!). Some members possessed organisational or political skills, some members followed only the issues important for their constituency. The only possibility left to keep the NGO structure broad and open was to convene the Co-ordinating Committee by the two European members of the ISC. At its first and last meeting (on the 27th of July), the CC was renamed 'Joint Co-ordinating Council' (JCC) but never reconvened, not even during the NGO Forum in Durban where the majority of its members were present.

The same happened with the drafters who had already done an enormous task, compiling the declarations from all regional NGO Forums during the preparatory process. Different constituencies insisted to set up an official drafting committee consisting of delegates of all different regions and constituencies. It was obvious that a big body would not be able to work properly and that there were no funds foreseen for the work of such a body. The whole drafting process started from zero and the European delegate resigned. Another Drafting Committee of 8 persons was set up in August.

Finally, SANGOCO deprived the ISC of all organisational competence when it took the role of Secretariat of the ISC - beside the tasks of the Secretariat of the NGO Forum. Two European delegates (from UNITED and ENAR) had a very difficult position in the ISC since they were its only white members. Some other members were extremely sensitive to us - we could be sure that every word that might have a double meaning was understood in its unwanted meaning and we were accused of racism. There was a barrier of different organisational methods and cultural habits. For example, I was making the minutes of all meetings since May 2000. When the new ISC met for the first time I proposed continuing doing so, despite the fact that my English was not perfect. Some delegates of SANGOCO felt this proposal was a white supremacist move, as if I did not have confidence in the ability of people of colour to do that job properly. So this task was transferred to SANGOCO/Secretariat of the NGO Forum.

The main problem occurred when the Secretariat presented a Programme of the NGO Forum to the ISC for approval. It was titled "Final Programme of the NGO Forum" and the Secretariat told us that it had already been sent to the print shop, that all chairpersons, rapporteurs and resource persons listed in it had already been invited and their flight tickets had been paid for (with UN funds)! The ISC noted that the mix of those "dignitaries" made by the Secretariat was arbitrary and did not contain the most dedicated and respected personalities of many groups targeted by racism and related intolerance. The Draft NGO Declaration by the Secretariat was of a similar kind - it took a one-sided position in some conflicts (Middle East) and some issues were (Roma/Sinti) distorted or missing.

Since the delegates of SANGOCO and the Secretariat had already returned home, the ISC sent two members to South Africa to negotiate on the programme, in order to make room at least to those personalities known to be going to WCAR anyhow. The ISC delegates negotiated for two days with all local organisers present managed to come to a consensus on the programme, after which they went back to Geneva to report to the ISC. The final programme was made and immediately (on 4th of August) sent to the Secretariat by e-mail.

2. Durban

What a surprise! The Secretariat printed out and distributed its "Final Programme" version from July, not the one agreed upon together with ISC in the beginning of August. This time we decided not to subsequently (ex-post) approve this 'ready-made reality' the ISC was presented with. The ISC rewrote the programme overnight and distributed it the next morning with an apology to the participants of the NGO Forum. This evoked a hysterical reaction from some of the local organisers. One staff member distributed a pamphlet accusing the whole "reactionary ISC" of undermining the common fight against racism.

At the same time, the participants were facing a chaotic situation with their accommodation, registration and repayment of scholarships. Instead of attending meetings they came for, they were forced to wait in long queues. Despite all that SANGOCO and the Secretariat did a huge amount of work and were quite successful in a lot of matters. The main reason of the problems seemed to be that they mixed up the organisational tasks they were charged with by the HCHR

Office with their own political ambitions. They didn't allow the ISC to take the political decisions and when they did they often did not respect those decisions.

For example, nobody consulted the ISC or even informed it in advance of the fact that Fidel Castro was to speak for two hours at the final ceremony. This was a political decision. Staff members pretended and demanded to be treated equally as the elected representatives of the global NGO community. The consequence was a series of organisational and political problems, since nobody would have been able to successfully fulfil the organisational and political tasks even if they were working for 25 hours a day. For the next (world) conference: since the UN also pays the organizing bureau, it should set rules and regulations for the organizing bureau or structure, eg. that it should not have any (political) agenda or just be a commercial bureau.

The majority of ISC members defended the interests of their own constituency but were not eager to solve the conflicts of other groups. When it became obvious that the NGO community would not reach consensus on the Middle East issue, the ISC should have resigned to its political decision-making role. For example by doing the same as the governments finally did: either reach a consensus or delete the contradictory issues completely, with the result of having a document with some "holes" in it but respected by the whole NGO community and perhaps by governments too. Instead, the ISC came up with a "Solomon's solution": Let all victims describe their situation as they see it, in their own language, without interference from others, not even when describing their situation would insult other groups of victims. It is obvious that you cannot come to a coherent and balanced result by that method.

Indeed, even this most important principle was abandoned during the final plenary session of the NGO Forum on the 1st of September: the Ecumenical Caucus raised a motion to delete a paragraph from the text drafted by the Thematic Commission on Anti-Semitism. That motion was carried in a shouting crowd. In protest, the Jewish NGOs left the meeting without any attempt by the South African chairperson to call them back and to have their voice heard. The Roma Caucus then refused to speak and vote. When I (as the "watch-dog" for the Rules of Procedure on behalf of ISC at that meeting) raised an objection as a point of order. The chairperson has not put it to vote, influenced by the same shouting crowd. Finally, he had not put the whole document to the final vote, explicitly requested by the Rules of Procedure. The procedure was quite strange because dozens of amendments to the draft were put to a vote and approved without having been read or tabled at all.

By the way, the Secretariat together with some ISC member wrote and distributed to the participants another set of the Rules of Procedure than the ones approved immediately before that by the ISC. None of those were followed but for the rule of 5 minutes' speaking time per caucus. I sought a remedy at the next ISC meeting on the 2nd September. The ISC was in a position to decide on this point of order by undoing the illegal change (the deletion of § 14 on Anti-Semitism). This would have not been a purely procedural but a political decision so the ISC found another "Solomon's solution". Instead of a judging that the Rules of Procedures had been breached the ISC said that *"for different reasons at that meeting, a different process emerged which has not been foreseen but it does not necessarily mean a violation of the Rules of Procedure. It considers the final NGO documents as adopted by the final plenary session but agrees to accompany it with a cover text explaining that the documents include the voice of victims and therefore they may reflect contradictory opinions."*

I warned that this decision would probably cause great political damage to the whole document and movement.

Despite that, some ISC members (without having informed the others) and even non-members entered the closed working session of the Drafting Committee and demanded not only to delete or change the aforementioned cover text but also to change the already adopted NGO document in the section on Anti-Semitism. After some attempts at discussion, the Drafting Committee felt so much intimidated that it left the workplace. The invaders then took the finalisation of the NGO document in their own hands.

The Eastern and Central Europe NGO Caucus reacted on this development by distancing itself from the whole NGO document containing hate language. Altogether 70 NGOs (also from Western Europe and Northern America) signed that protest declaration. The Secretary General of the WCAR, Ms. Mary Robinson, announced that for the first time in the history of the UN summits, she would not be able to commend the NGO document to the governments.

3. The NGO Declaration and Programme of Action

After having spoken with many activists, I believe that it would not be wise to refuse the whole document because of several paragraphs showing a clear intolerance and disrespect to others (including to UN resolutions). Too many groups of victims see their key issues (e.g. reparations for slave trade and colonialism) included after long years of fight for this kind of recognition (e.g. the Dalits). Refusing the Declaration would deepen the gaps in the anti-racist movement.

Neither is it possible to accept the hate-mongers' claims for respect of their language. It is not possible to change the document but it might be good to use its other parts (e.g. Education) when the opportunity is there. The contradictory parts concerning the Middle East cannot eventually be used in the conflict - its parties unfortunately use much "stronger" arguments than words. The world has seen it immediately after the WCAR.

Respecting the right of victims to be heard, I see the main problem in the language used in the paragraphs 162, 418, 419, 424 and 425 of the NGO Declaration and Programme of Action - sections Palestine and Palestinians:

§ 162: *We declare Israel as a racist, apartheid state*

Generally, one can speak about a racist or apartheid government or regime. To declare a state as a racist entity could mean (and many participants of the NGO Forum are sure that this is the purpose of the language used) that this entity has no right to exist.

§ 418: *call for the reinstatement of UN resolution 3379 determining the practices of Zionism as racist practices*

This is a counterproductive demand for the whole anti-racist movement.

§ 419: *Call for the establishment of a war crimes tribunal to investigate and bring to justice those who may be guilty of war crimes, acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing and the crime of Apartheid*
Genocide and ethnic cleansing are terms of the international law. Whoever visited Auschwitz or Rwanda knows that this was incomparable with what is happening in Palestine (not denying the crimes committed by the Israeli government but their quantity is incomparable). Everyone should agree with placing this paragraph as general, not singling out Israel.

§ 424: *Call upon the international community to impose a policy of complete and total isolation of Israel as an apartheid state as in the case of South Africa which means the imposition of mandatory and comprehensive sanctions and embargoes,*

Practically the whole NGO community and many governments have recognised that blockades are not successful and that they cause suffering of ordinary people, not changing the minds of the governments.

§ 425: *Condemnation of those states who are supporting, aiding and abetting the Israeli Apartheid state and its perpetration of racist crimes against humanity including ethnic cleansing, acts of genocide.*

The same as to § 419.

The globalisation of capital has social and environmental consequences - all anti-globalisation activists know that. Indeed, the NGO document speaks only about the social ones (as a source of racism). The environmental impacts (e.g. the refusal of the Kyoto protocol by the USA) are misinterpreted as isolated "environmental racism" which in fact has very little to do with real racism. This may divide us from our natural allies.

4. Follow up

I was afraid that the governments would not be able to produce a consented declaration and programme of action. My most important dream (besides to contribute to a consistent and balanced NGO document) was that a global network of anti-racist and human-rights NGOs would be set up in Durban - after the environmental NGOs had done so in Rio de Janeiro, social NGOs had done in Copenhagen and women's NGOs in Beijing. None of the networks has a central secretariat as far as I know. The relations among those NGOs are not ideal but they feel the necessity to discuss the global issues instead of fighting each other. They fight for common goals while respecting the plurality of the movements as well as the different ways and strategies of

other NGOs in order to achieve the common goals.

Unfortunately, this is not the case with the anti-racist NGOs. There was lots of mistrust and disrespect from the first moment of the preparatory process. I strongly believed that relations would improve during the NGO Forum when people would come together, get to know each other and speak with each other. Instead, some people came to win over "the others" or to push forward their particular cause. In this atmosphere, no attempt to organize a broad discussion on the future of the movement was made. Many ISC members got frustrated, seeing the fights and worsening relations between people and groups during the NGO Forum.

All of us would probably agree that another conference ("Durban +5") accompanied by an NGO Forum is needed to strengthen and deepen the fight against the scourge of racism as well as to fill the gaps between the governments and between the NGOs. I already asked the Czech government to offer Prague as its venue.

The mandate of the ISC has expired. Nobody has been mandated to serve as a "central committee" of the movement (if it still is a movement). We have a very difficult task before us to build up mutual trust and respect among NGOs if we want to create a global network during the preparatory process of the next conference. To achieve this, we have to work on a regional basis. The regional representations should communicate and co-operate with each other frequently. Mutual support is very important while not imposing the Western culture or "US democracy" on the other regions but rather listening to their concerns.

If the United Nations want to see such a movement they have to support it financially not only from their budget but also by encouraging big donors to do so. Instead of founding an official structure with a strong center and paid staff which in this phase could hardly gain the trust of the whole movement, I would advise to have the necessary tasks decentralized. This means that some experienced NGO/network should keep the dissemination of information, another should update the databases, another one should organise fund raising for the necessary tasks, etc. There would be nobody entitled to speak on behalf of the whole movement and no secretariat to speak in the name of non-existing or non-operational bodies.

It would be good to concentrate on the National Action Plans in between, i.e. to lobby for their adoption by each and every government and for their implementation in co-operation with NGOs. By doing that, we could improve our positions in our societies as well as towards the governments and UNO.

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Mirek Prokes, UNITED for Intercultural Action

UNITED for Intercultural Action
European network against nationalism, racism, fascism
and in support of migrants and refugees
Postbus 413, NL-1000 AK Amsterdam, Netherlands
phone +31-20-6834778, fax +31-20-6834582
info@unitedagainstracism.org, www.unitedagainstracism.org