The Relations Between the United Nations and Civil Society: Past, Present, and Future

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Introduction

This paper addresses the question of the relations between the United Nations and “civil society” with a twofold starting point. First, the United Nations, which is the only truly global organization in terms of geographical and material reach, was primarily designed as a partnership of states, and its modes of action and decision reflect this a priori. Second, the recent history of the world has witnessed the emergence of a global human consciousness, which is increasingly able to organize into a global “civil society” voicing a global “public opinion.” Both the United Nations and the emerging global civil society claim to have a role to play in the government of world affairs. We will thus study how these two forces have interacted in engaging with this task. Global civil society is reflected by a multitude of forms, of which the most prominent is the figure of the “Non-Governmental Organization” (NGO), which we will define below. We will therefore use NGOs as our ideal-type in this paper.

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The “government of world affairs” is of course multi-faceted, and consists notably of a norm-setting dimension and of an operational, norm-implementation dimension. The United Nations and NGOs are active in both those dimensions.\textsuperscript{1} We will, however, focus on the norm-setting dimension of their relationship, as it appears to be more significant from a normative point of view. This paper will address in its first two chapters the institutional arrangements that were made to provide for United Nations-NGOs relations. The last chapter will assess whether these arrangements are well-suited for achieving efficient and democratic global governance, and explore if and how the UN has the intention to move towards those goals in the future.

A. The Intergovernmental Configuration of the United Nations

When the United Nations was founded, about sixty years ago, the world was coming out of one of the direst periods in the history of mankind. A strong need was felt across the then few states of the world to address the issues of world peace and security in a new and innovative way. The rise of nationalisms had not been mitigated by the disastrous First World War and the experience of the League on Nations. Actually, it had accelerated, for various reasons which are too complex to be explained here. In the aftermath of World War II, taking note of the failure of the League of Nations, the victors gathered in San Francisco and re-imagined a permanent institution where world issues could be addressed multilaterally and in a spirit of dialogue.

Although the Charter of the United Nations starts with the words “We the Peoples of the United Nations”, and though state-centered international politics had just demonstrated their shortcomings, the new institution was designed as an exclusively inter-governmental body. It was indeed not yet common at the time to reflect about international political entities and international government in terms other than state-related. However, the drafters of the United Nations Charter imagined the role of the world institution through several lenses, as they put together a structure composed of several specialized bodies. Most notably, as regards norm and policy-setting, next to the General Assembly, the Charter provides for two councils that are assigned different scopes of work: the Security Council is put in charge of