

Latin-American and Caribbean NGOs:
Facing Challenges for Greater Participation at the United Nations Economic and
Social Council

by
Daniela Navas Perrone *

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* Master student on Development and Population Sciences at the Catholic University of Lovain-la- Neuve in Belgium, degree expected in September 2009. danielanp@hotmail.com

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Email surveys¹

Asociacion Conciencia, Argentina (Special, 1996)
Asociacion Cultural Sejekto de Costa Rica, Costa Rica (Roster, 1996)
Asociacion Civil Consorcio Desarrollo y Justicia, Venezuela (Special, 2006)
Comunicacion Cultural, Mexico (Special, 1996)
Federation of Cuban Women , Cuba (Special, 1997)
Fundación para Estudio Investigación de la Mujer, Argentina (Special, 2006)
Habitat International Coalition, Chile (Special, 1993)

Phone communications

Fundación Mujeres en Igualdad, Argentina (Special, 2005)
Center for Human Rights and Environment, Argentina (Special, 2007)

Interviews²

Gran Fraternidad Universal - Universal Great Brotherhood, Venezuela (Special, 2000)
Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, Philippines (Special, 1995)
Magda Lanuza, Nicaragua

¹ A survey was sent to 93 Latin American and the Caribbean NGOs in consultative status on 1 July 2009.

² The interviews were conducted during the United Nations Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and its Impact on Development, June 24-26

Introduction

“Today, no United Nations development effort – whether advocacy for a broad cause or support for specific goals – can make real headway without support of civil society”

Secretary-General, Ban-ki Moon³

Civil society involvement in the United Nations system has been a key factor to enhance the effectiveness of UN agencies in dealing with complex global issues. In this regard, Article 71 of the UN Charter⁴ allows The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to entertain consultative relationships with NGOs. In fact, ECOSOC is the only United Nations body qualified to create both a formal and legal framework for NGO participation.

The document governing requirements, rights and obligations of NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC is Resolution 1996/31⁵. It recognizes participatory opportunities for national and international NGOs within ECOSOC and its Functional Commissions, and explicitly encourages priority for NGOs from developing countries and from countries with economies in transition, which represents a big step forward concerning greater participation from these regions.

Since the regulation of the accreditation process, ECOSOC has experienced a rapid increase in the number of organizations with consultative status; from 1996 to 2009 this number has tripled. Figures also reveal a rise of the percentage of developing countries organizations, from 21% in 1996 to 34% in 2007⁶. However, in the last report of the NGO Branch⁷, the

³ Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon’s remarks at the ceremony for the handover of the presidency of the Economic and Social Council in New York, 17 January 2007.

⁴ Charter of the United Nations, Chapter X: The Economic and Social Council. Available at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter10.shtml>

⁵ <http://www.un.org/documents/ecosoc/res/1996/eres1996-31.htm>

⁶ Kamiya (2007), p.31-32

⁷ NGO Section UNDESA, The NGO Committee: a ten-year review 1998-2008

‘evolution on application’ presented for the 1998-2008 period demonstrated that this improvement was achieved in the first stages following the application of the Resolution.

An article by Willetts (2006) suggests that the necessity of NGOs to have a headquarter office in a specific country in North America or Europe, labels them as “Northern”, even if the geographical spread of its activities are mainly set in “Southern” countries. Willetts states: “An organization, such as Amnesty International, with 56 National Sections, groups in some 40 other countries, an International Secretariat from over 50 countries and an African Secretary-General is a global NGO, even if it started in Britain and has its headquarters in London”. From this point of view, South representation can be disguised by the way the NGOs are classified by countries. But even if these kinds of global NGOs can be conceived as potential actors for developing regional involvement, it is important to recognize their limitations to overcome abstract and theoretical speech in international discussions.

In contrast, “Southern” NGOs, actors in the “playground” itself, can boost reality and depth in the construction of a global agenda. Even though ECOSOC recognizes this need, the landscape of NGOs with consultative status still marks a disproportionate representation of regions, especially for Latin America and Caribbean (LAC).

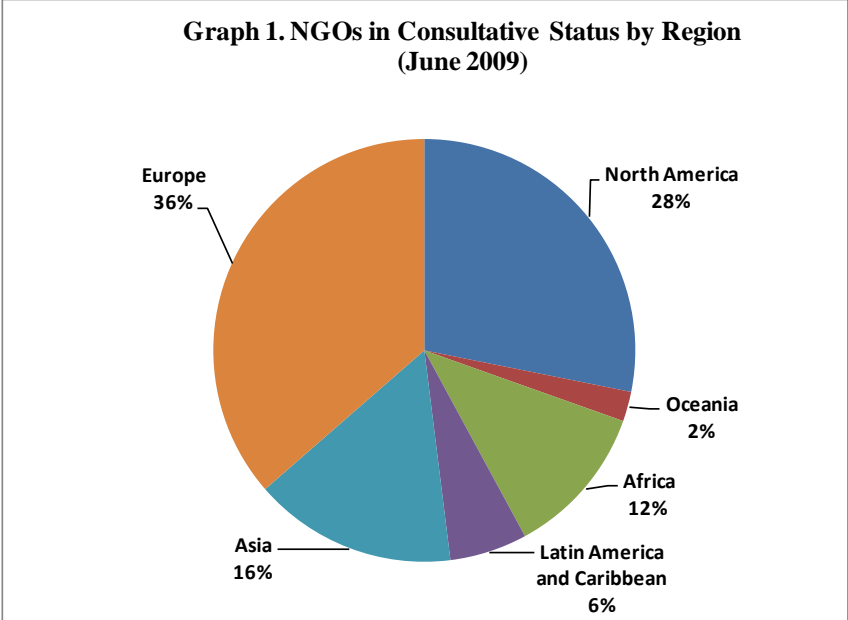
Under this scenario, the present paper aims to provide recommendations to encourage outreach in the region by analyzing some of the causes for low number of LAC NGOs with consultative status and weak involvement of Latin American and Caribbean civil society within the Council and its Functional Commissions.

This research has been divided into three parts. First, an overview of the current situation of the LAC NGOs with status in the Council will be presented; a quantitative and qualitative analysis on the participation will show general trends of the region. Second, three factors

influencing participation will be developed: recent events in the region that are affecting NGOs participation at the national, regional and international level; challenges in NGOs’ operational capacity factors, and weak evidence of the interface between ECOSOC and NGOs of the region. Finally, recommendations for an outreach programme for the region will be proposed.

1.Latin-American and Caribbean NGOs Participation at ECOSOC

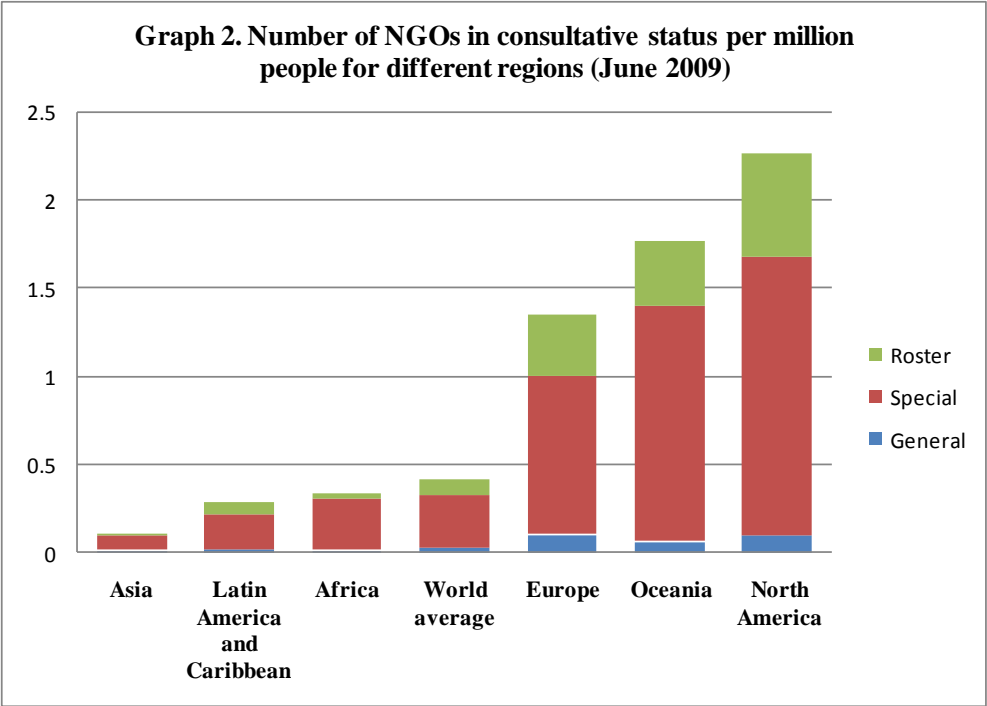
According to the number of NGOs registered at ECOSOC⁸, it can be stated that developing regions are those with the weakest numbers. For instance, organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia, as a whole, can hardly approach the number of European NGOs. Under these circumstances, the case of LAC is the most dramatic. Graph 1⁹ clearly shows that LAC represents around six percent of the total NGOs with consultative status, placing the region in a position of second to last representation after Oceania (2%).



Source: NGO Branch/DESA

⁸ The data used for the analysis and the access to the virtual platform for NGOs was facilitated by the ONG Branch.
⁹ A total of 3194 NGOs are in consultative status with ECOSOC (June 2009). For the region analysis, 466 NGOs were excluded because the information about the country of their headquarters was not specified. On the contrary, after revising LAC NGOs from that pool, 16 NGOs from the region were identified and taken into consideration for the analysis.

These figures confirm the weakness of Latin America and the Caribbean, especially when they are compared to the size of its population. Graph 2 illustrates the number of NGOs with consultative status per million people in different regions. Asia (0.10 NGOs/million people), Latin America and the Caribbean (0.28 NGOs/million people) and Africa (0.33 NGOs/million people) are below the world average (0.41 NGOs/million people), while Europe (1.35 NGOs/million people), Oceania (1.77 NGOs/million people), and North America (2.27 NGOs/million people) have the strongest representation of NGOs.



Source: NGO Branch/DESA and Population Reference Bureau (2008 World Population)

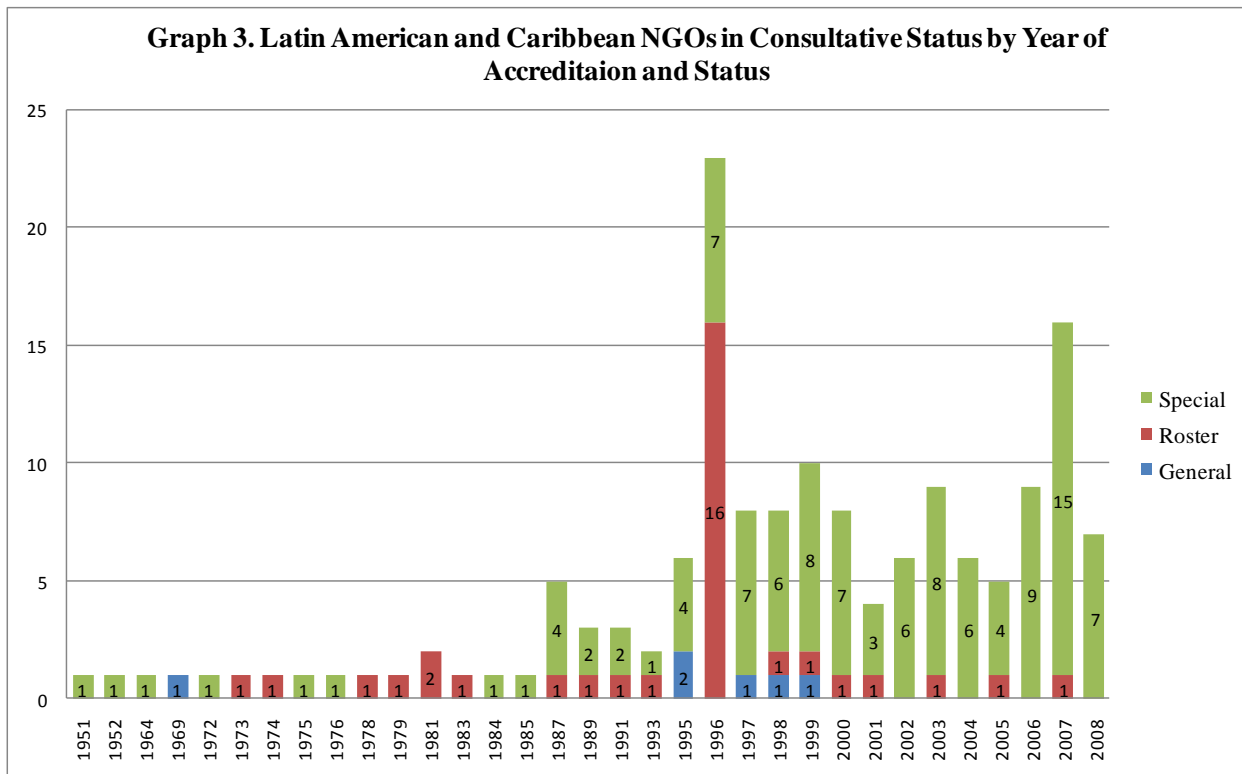
Defining the global situation sets the alarm for a proper assessment of the structure of the population of NGOs in the region. First of all, the region follows the global trend in terms of composition of types of status, where the Special Category is the most frequently granted.

Table 1. NGOs in Consultative Status

Accreditation	LAC NGOs in Consultative Status	Total NGOs in Consultative Status
General	6	139
Roster	42	974
Special	114	2081
Grand Total	162	3194

Source: NGO Branch/DESA

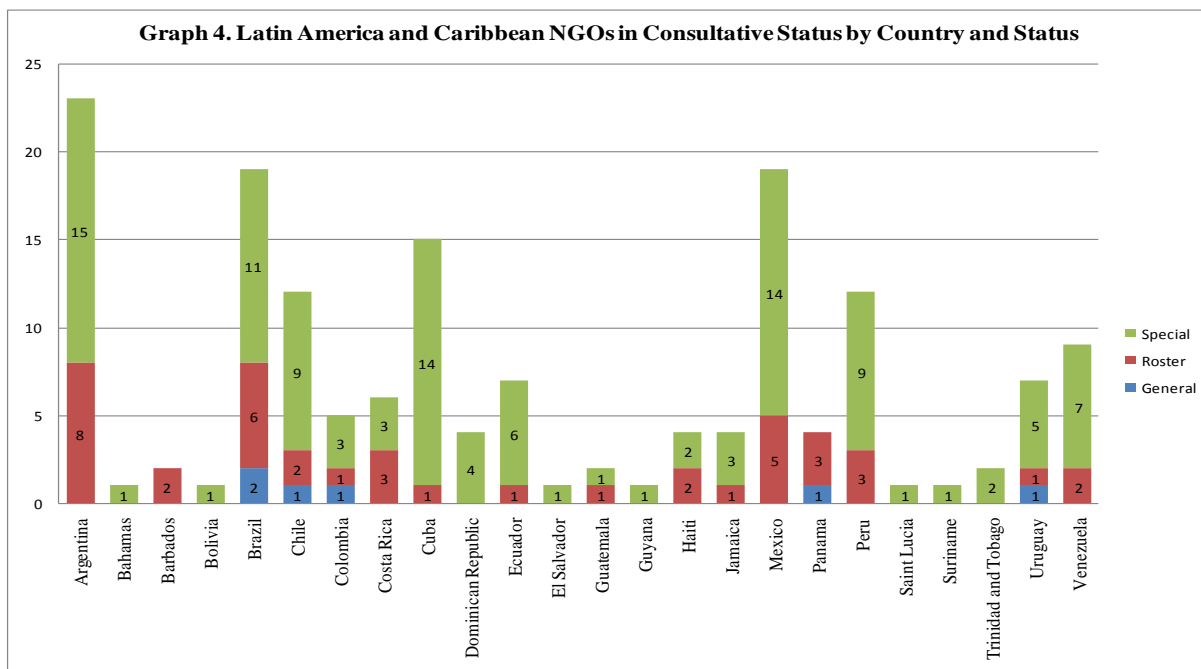
In addition, the evolution of accreditation is also replicated at the regional level. Graph 3 exhibits NGOs by year of application; it illustrates from 1951 to 1995 how applications remained poor and stagnant. However, 1996 was a breaking point in terms of growth. The reason for such a change was the implementation of ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31. This year is particularly important for the Roster applications in LAC, they represent almost half of the total of this type of accreditation in the region.



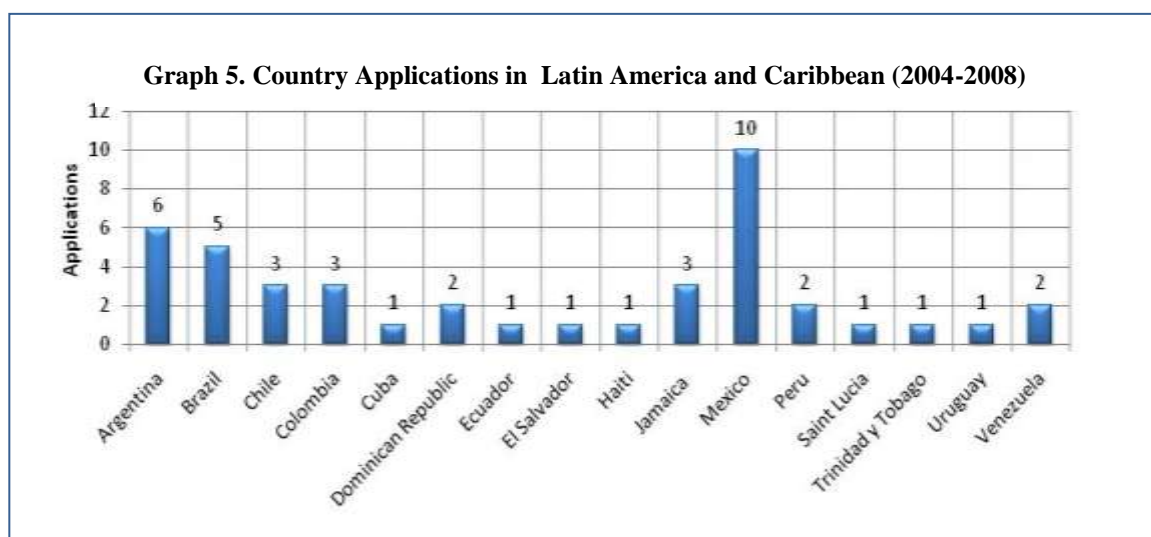
Source: NGO Branch/DESA, June 2009

In general, the region follows the global trend after 1996, but without significant growth. In fact, after a peak in 1996 (23 applications) the average number of applications has remained at eight per year.

Another important criteria influencing the structure of NGOs, is the representation of countries. Graph 4 shows the number of organizations by country. The most representative being: Argentina (23), Brazil and Mexico (19), Cuba (15), Chile and Peru (12). This information can be compared with the countries with the most applications in the last five years (Graph 5): Mexico (10), Argentina (6), Brazil (5), and Chile Colombia and Jamaica (3). The first three positions are expected due to the characteristics of the countries in terms of economic performance and political representation in the region. Nonetheless, the weak number of NGOs in each country makes it difficult to get general conclusions about the dynamic of the applications in the region. For instance, Cuba is well-ranked in terms of numbers of NGOs, but in terms of growth in applications the country has had low performances in the last couple of years. Almost the entire sum of its accreditations (13 out of 15), were granted in the 90's.



Source: NGO Branch/DESA, June 2009



Source: NGO Branch/DESA, June 2009

There is no doubt that numbers have a significant influence in making visible participation and engagement of the regions in ECOSOC activities. However, quality is also a very important factor that could neutralize the quantitative challenge. In the case of LAC, two factors have been taken into account: the participation of NGOs in meetings organized by subsidiary bodies of ECOSOC and the number of written statements submitted at the High-Level Segment.

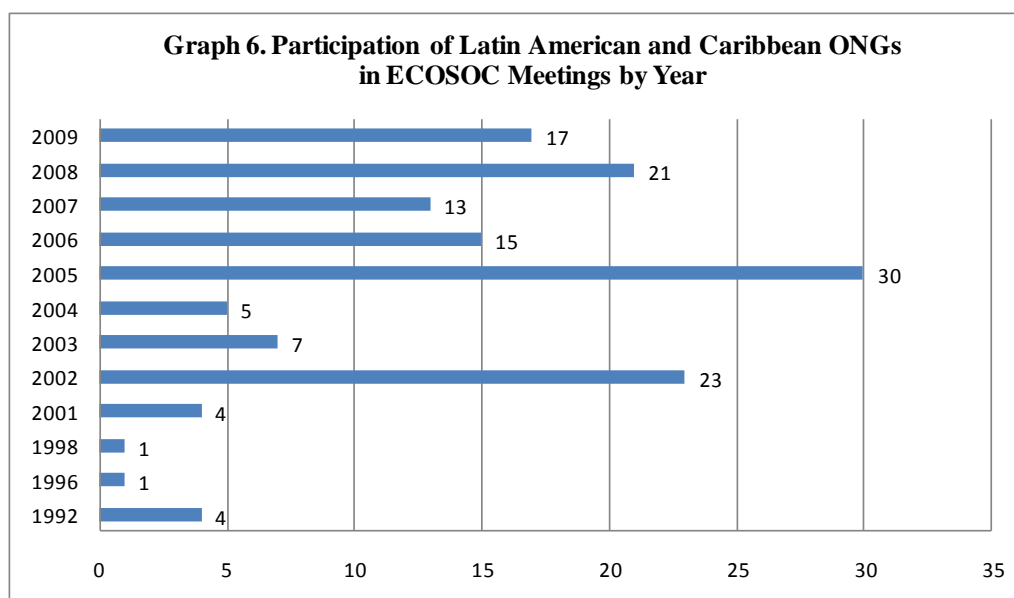
The following table shows the classification of meetings within subsidiary bodies of ECOSOC and the number of participating LAC NGOs covering the period of 1992-2009.

Table 2. Number of Participations in Conferences (1992-2009)

Meeting Type	Number of Participations
Financing for Development	2
Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues	12
Public Administration	0
Social Development	16
Status of Women	73
Sustainable Development	35
UN Forum on Forests	3
	141

Source: NGO Branch/DESA, June 2009

The Status of Women and Sustainable Development appear as the main areas of attention for the region¹⁰. The reason for such a result is due to the participation in particular meetings that in general terms were quite popular, for example, the “Johannesburg Summit (WSSD)” in 2002.



Source: NGO Branch/DESA, June 2009

In addition, by taking a look at the evolution of participation in meetings (Graph 6), the region has experienced a light recovery in the last five years. However, this recovery is due to the active participation of specific NGOs that extrapolate the numbers. Also Graph 6 presents some peaks of participation in 2002 and 2005, confirming the influence of participation in well-known meetings.

¹⁰ Further discussion on relevant issues for LAC will be developed in the context analysis of this paper.

In general, the most attended meeting was the “10 Year Review: 49 Session of the Commission on the Status of Women” in 2005. Nineteen NGOs with consultative status represented the region; however this number appears minuscule when compared with the 595 organizations that participate in the event¹¹.

As stated above, there is a reduced group of NGOs in the region getting involved in events at ECOSOC, most of them from Brazil and Argentina. By analyzing their dynamic, a typology of common behaviors has been noticed. The first group is NGOs that actively started participating in meetings once they obtain consultative status. There are also organizations with sporadic event involvement. A third group is related to very inactive past participation that suddenly started attending meetings in the last couple of years. The fourth group was very active in the past that has recently stopped sending representatives to events. Under this optic, it is not possible to state that there is a correlation between having status and the participation in meetings.

In terms of participation in written statements, Latin America and the Caribbean Region have the lowest performance after Oceania and Africa. The next table illustrates the number of written statements presented at the High-Level Segment (2006-2009); in which LAC represents 8% of the pool.

Table 3. Written Statements Presented at High Level Segment

Region	2006	2007	2008	2009	Grand Total
Africa	1	1	1		3
Asia	9		6	4	19
Europe	9	5	9	17	40
Latin America and Caribbean	2	1	2	3	8
North America	12	2	6	9	29
Oceania	1				1
Grand Total	34	9	24	33	100

Source: NGO Branch/DESA, June 2009

¹¹ <http://www.un-ngls.org/orf/pdf/RU122-Commission-Status-Women.pdf>

This number has been achieved by only four NGOs in the region, Legiao da Boa Vontade (4), Oasis Open City Foundation (1) and Family Welfare in Brazil Civil Society (1) from Brazil; Foundation Alvarallice (1) from Colombia; and Mujer para la Mujer (1) from Mexico. This shows, once again, that participation is concentrated in only a few organizations.

It is important to state that the source of information for meeting participation may have some inconsistencies because the registration in the online system is voluntary for the NGOs. However, the analysis above contains a sufficient amount of evidence to affirm that Latin American and Caribbean NGOs are facing the challenges of applying for consultative status and of getting engaged in the Council activities.

2. Three Factors Influencing Participation

2.1 A new generation of NGOs in Latin America and the Caribbean

A general analysis of the phenomenon of NGOs in Latin America and the Caribbean is only observed by accepting the limits of a synthesized complex reality. On one hand, the region represents more than forty countries with their own culture, ways of social reproduction and views of life¹²; and on the other hand, civil society organizations represent a mosaic of views, interests and actors. Therefore we are dealing with a complex configuration, difficult to pack and label. Under this perspective, the following analysis seeks to explore general trends in the context of the region, influencing NGOs focal points and participation in the national, regional and international arena, and consequently, affecting their involvement in ECOSOC system.

In the recent decades, LAC has experienced a remarkable increase in the number of NGOs; they have become visible actors in the region and unique contributors to the development

¹² Research works on Latin America and Caribbean tend to systematize their analysis in three sub regions: 1) Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, 2) Andean Countries, and 3) South Cone and Brazil.

agenda. They not only respond to the prevalent development issue, poverty reduction, but they also evolve at the pace of regional demands.

Balbis (2001) argues that civil society organizations are strongly affected by the changes of the social, economic and political structures, in this regard the author proposes four generations of NGOs in LAC. The first generation appeared in the 50s and was promoted by the Catholic Church and the corporate sector with the aim to assist poor populations. Although there was a strong presence of welfare states in the region, these NGOs started a joint movement of efforts for the benefit of the weakest. The 60s and 70s witnessed popular organization in opposition with governmental structures; this second wave of NGOs was even more “committed to the poor” and oriented their actions to different approaches. For instance, the author mentions the “awareness” approach that promotes transformation through education and social organization.

The 70s were inundated with dictatorial episodes that reinforced the opposition between state and civil society, and according to Balbis, this was the period when NGOs dramatically increased in LAC. This ‘boom’ led to a third generation of NGOs who were mature enough to claim legitimacy. The particular scenario of the 80s was also favorable for the institutionalization of the NGOs due to a general economic crisis throughout the region, adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and neoliberal governments. Under these circumstances, civil society was pushed to conceive new development alternatives capable of facing the retreat of the welfare state; the sector was empowered, worked more effectively and acquired a certain level of specialization in new fields of influence, such as, woman in development and the protection of human rights.

The last generation presented by Balbis is aligned with market logic and economic growth as supreme conditions for development. During the 90s, Latin American and Caribbean states embraced neoliberal policies deeply, quickly, and enthusiastically. NGOs lost ideological speech and became more pragmatic with a high level of specialization; they also began to expand to microfinance operations and attracted funding through international cooperation. Moreover, a new modality of NGOs appeared within the private sector, they learned how corporate social responsibility actions can enhance prestige and profitability. Thus they joined civil society by creating their own NGOs.

Balbis' research demonstrates that NGOs adapt rapidly to the context in which they operate. Following this viewpoint, it is possible to conceive of a new generation of NGOs in light of important political changes in the last few years that have had a special impact on the influence of civil society on the national development agenda.

In 2006, Latin America and the Caribbean faced presidential elections in twelve countries marking the current political trend in the region¹³. The centre-right won in three nations (Honduras, Colombia and Mexico), while in Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Venezuela, Chile, Haïti, Costa Rica, Peru, and Brazil the triumph of the left announced deep changes for the region, especially for civil society participation in politics and its relationship with the state.

Since the last couple of years, a rich literature has fed the debate on the new political scenario and prospects in Latin America and the Caribbean. Different left postures and strategies are present in the region¹⁴ but they all converge on three constants¹⁵: (1) there is major concern

¹³ VARGAS-LLOSA (2006)

¹⁴ "With all the talk of Latin America's turn to the left, few have noticed that there are really two lefts in the region. One has radical roots but is now open-minded and modern; the other is close-minded and stridently populist." CASTAÑEDA, Jorge, « Latin America's Left Turn », *Foreign Affairs*, New York, May-June 2006

¹⁵ MARTHOZ, Jean-Paul (dir), *Ou va l'Amérique Latine? : Tour d'horizon d'un continent en pleine mutation*, 2007, p.28

on social issues, the fight against poverty and exclusion, (2) the desire for independence from Washington and (3) the return of state regulation in the economy.

Some authors argue that this new left turn is the fruit of a long fight of social movements for the vindication of the human being and nature over capital. Therefore, this new atmosphere reflects the importance of these movements in the region and confirms the fallacy of civil society as a secondary world¹⁶. In fact, in some countries like Bolivia and Ecuador, there is a strong bond between social movements and political actions for institutional and social transformation. The next table summarizes important events in the region in 2006¹⁷, evidence of the reinforcement and revalorization of some thematic issues affecting NGOs' focal points.

Issue	Event
Civil society in politics	Constituent assembly in Ecuador and Bolivia as an opportunity to "refound the country". Governments reinforce their relationship with indigenous movements and popular sectors.
Social Forums	1st Caribbean Social Forum Forum (5-9 July 2006) in Martinique and World Social Forum (January 2006) in Caracas Discussion on alternative development strategies for the region.
Trade Agreements	Regional trade agreements meetings: MERCOSUR, CAN, CARICOM, ACC. They demonstrated regional cooperation for trade, transport, tourism and technological issues. Costa Rica, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay – Protests against the Free Trade Agreement with the United States of America. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colombia - 50,000 people of all sectors protested (14-15 May 2006) • Costa Rica – 60,000 people protested including farmers, public employees, cultural organizations, syndicates, students, and indigenous movements (23-24 October 2006). In February 2007 the biggest mobilization in the history of the country congregated 150,000 people in San Jose
Natural resources and Environment	Panama, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile – mobilizations against transnational corporations in the mining sector.

¹⁶ Kliksberg (2004), p.55

¹⁷ Adapted from Silvio Caccia Brava and Gustavo Gomes da Costa Santos (2008). The aim of this compilation is to show some examples of important events in the region in 2006; it does not constitute an exhaustive analysis. Social forums and trade agreements has been completed through internet articles.,

	<p>The case of the “papeleras” Argentina and Uruguay (December 2006). The Argentinean city of Gualeguaychú led the protests against transnational corporations polluting Uruguay river.</p> <p>Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador – petroleum nationalization</p> <p>Nicaragua, Panama – social mobilization against multinational corporations on monoculture export crops. The use of pesticides (Nemagon) caused the death of hundreds of people and some thousands of people with related illnesses.</p> <p>Colombia, Ecuador – Farmers protested against aerial fumigation of coca plantations.</p> <p>Paraguay, Brazil, Bolivia - farmers without land make mobilizations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brazil – Mobilizations of the biggest movement of farmers without land (two million people), “Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra”. Sixteen thousand families in 23 states protest for their right to land (April 2007)
Public services	<p>Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia. Protests against privatization of water.</p> <p>Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Chile, Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay – public teachers protest for better salaries and improvement of education quality, also students were involved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Revolucion de los pingüinos” in Chile (more than 400.000 students protest). <p>Honduras, Nicaragua, Chile, Paraguay, Brazil – doctors and nurses mobilizations for better salaries.</p>

Although the protests and mobilizations did not all end in successful results, these events reflect the attention of the region on the sovereignty and conservation of natural resources, regional integration, alternative development strategies and social inclusion. Consequently, it is possible to state that the dynamic of the region set the conditions for a new generation of NGOs that have revised their agendas and fields of influence in order to be compatible with the demands of LAC society.

A particularity of the NGOs in the region is the remarkable focus on gender, indigenous and environmental issues. Certainly there are instances of ECOSOC bodies and agencies covering these topics, nevertheless, awareness of the interests of the region can lead the way forward in a better approach to participation, not only in terms of fora, but also by revalorizing the context that LAC NGOs bring to the debate on these issues.

The next table shows a list of words that have been scanned through the names of the 162 Latin American and Caribbean NGOs with consultative status in ECOSOC. Even though the sample used is minuscule in relation to the universe of NGOs¹⁸, this exercise can illustrate focal points to work on an outreach program for the region. The chart confirms gender, environmental and indigenous issues as imperative topics for the regions, but also reveals human rights, family and cultural issues as being significant.

Table 4. Number of repetition of words in the names of LAC NGOs in consultative status

Issue	No. NGOs
Latin America/Inter American	24
Gender/feminist/woman/motherhood	23
Development	10
Human Rights	10
Nature/environment/ecologic/	10
Jurist/law/justice/rights/defense	9
Andino/Indigenous/Indian/Pueblos indígenas	7
Children/Youth	6
Cultural	6
Peace	5
Family	5

Source: NGO Branch/DESA, June 2009

In addition, the reinforcement of movements of historically excluded actors– women, indigenous people, farmers – has changed the way they are conceived in the political arena. Martín Carretero (2008)¹⁹ points out that the most relevant contribution of civil society in the region is the promotion of “social belonging”. The author states that these groups not only work for their social inclusion, but they have also found space in their governments to design

¹⁸In the middle of the 90s there were 10,000 NGOs in the region according to Koschutzcke research, cited by Balbis (2001) p.22

¹⁹Martín Carretero (2008), p.45

institutional frames for a greater participation in national and regional agendas. Under these circumstances, NGOs have a protagonist role to play in their own locations that could explain a lack of focus in the international playground.

“In Latin America, civil society organizations, professionals and the academia have consolidated their own strategies and articulations. Thus, they do not need to much the intermediation of United Nations system to negotiate with their governments, like African organizations that are legitimized by instances of the United Nations.”

Ana Sugranyes – Habitat International Coalition (HIC)

Finally, it is important to point out that valorizing the diversity of contexts is when the flow of the debate is enriched and ownership is possible. Consequently, a greater outreach of the region would depend, from one side, on ECOSOC capacity to consider the changing environment in Latin America and the Caribbean as an opportunity to learn in a symbiotic relationship, and from the other side, on Latin America and Caribbean civil society awareness of the need of a global agenda as a reference to ensure synergy among regions in order to step forward in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

“The subjects are neither updated, neither interesting. Latin America is changing fast and deeply, it is necessary an ECOSOC agile and updated, aware of Latin America reality”

Jose Dualok Rojas - Asociación Cultural Sejekto de Costa Rica

2.2 NGOs' operational capacity factors

In order to analyze capacity challenges of NGOs in LAC we are going to focus on operational capacity factors which are essential for an organization to remain relevant, to grow and to survive.

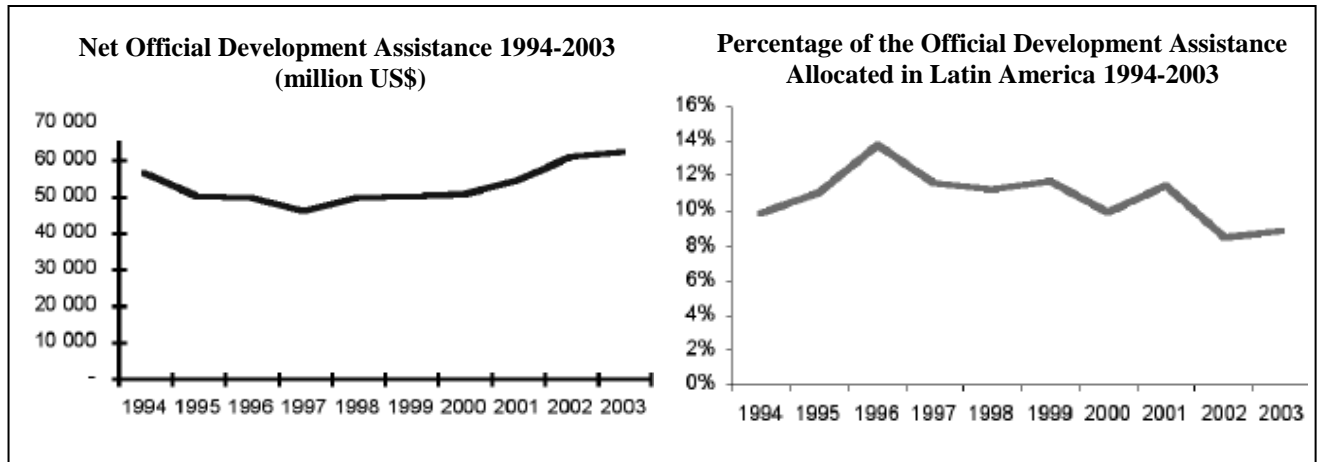
Financial management

Funding is probably the most critical problem NGOs are facing to increase their participation in ECOSOC. In fact, all the interviewed NGOs claim scarcity of financial resources.

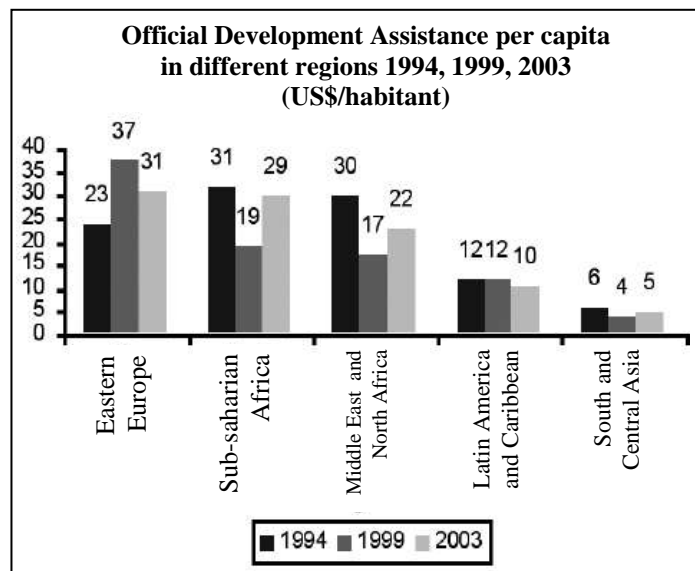
“Funds for NGO participation should be enough without deviation to other objectives. We cannot forget that even the Official Development Assistance is depressed in the region, as well as funds assigned by United Nations bodies who do not see Latin America as a priority”.

Yanis Cruz Gutsens – Federación de Mujeres Cubanas

This argument can be illustrated by analyzing the evolution of the percentage of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) allocated to LAC. The following tables show a relative loss of interest in the region as a receiver of ODA, receiving in 2003- in per capita terms- one third of the financial aid allocated to Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa.



Source: CAD/OCDE cited by ALOP (2006), p.14



Source: CAD/OCDE cited by ALOP (2006), p.15

Another cause of scarcity of financial resources is the competition national NGOs have to face with international NGOs. Some donors tend to channel funds through organizations in their own countries instead of providing assistance directly to national NGOs. This behavior jeopardizes the sustainability of national organizations. They are seen as incapable of implementing actions, not to mention that it can also develop dependency among local people who have lost the ownership perspective. In addition, regional donors are reluctant to sponsor meetings while there are programmes and projects which are considered more important and urgent.

The main areas of participation offered by ECOSOC demand an important mobilization of resources. The organizations not only have to allocate financial resources for plane tickets, accommodation and living expenses, but also require dedicated effort and time in preparation. Sending a delegation implies visa procedures which can take a couple of weeks to months - depending on the country - and also extra traveling expenses when Consulates are not available in the hometown. In addition, personnel will have to take over extra activities while their colleagues are overseas, and in some cases there are not even enough hands to avoid deficiency. Some NGOs also plan special fundraising strategies for ECOSOC meetings which are normally undertaken by the selected representatives; these activities are time-consuming and also distract the attention from NGO core activities.

Financial management is, in general, one of the main concerns for NGOs sustainability. That is why they make strategic decisions by allocating their resources to causes with substantial benefits. While asking organizations about their participation in events, some argue that all the effort invested in their participation is not compensated by what they obtain in the conferences, thus, they prefer to participate in regional or national conference closer to home.

Communication skills

Besides scarcity of financial resources, English skills are the main disadvantage NGOs allege to have. Since any official communication within the United Nations system has to be expressed in English or French, NGOs are supposed to have these language skills “au préalable”, this assumption is far from the reality in the region.

A proficiency in English, or at least a level high enough to pass the message, is vital in all the instances of participation in ECOSOC. In particular, NGOs struggle with the communication in the application process for consultative status. Even though there are NGOs with skills in

foreign languages, they are very few. Filling an application can take a lot of time but it also would need financial resources if translation services are used. Moreover, the review process may end in several “reminders” when the communication flow is interrupted by long translation procedures. In addition, poor and unclear applications can affect the relevance, prestige and background of the NGOs; in other words, the application form is the primary document to proceed with in the accreditation process, in other words NGOs sell themselves through this document.

Language skills are also a handicap for the submission of oral and written statements, as illustrated in part one of this paper. Nevertheless, the call for statements is made weeks in advance, time enough to solve any translation challenge. In this way, it seems that it is not only a matter of language problems, but other factors coming into play, such as: no information available regarding the deadlines for submissions, lack of interest of the NGOs, the possibility of making statements is unknown or even cultural specifications regarding time (last minute performances).

Participation in conferences and meetings are also affected by language problems. First, there is no translation service in the sessions; some representatives even perform simultaneous translations to their colleagues. Second, great networking and cooperation opportunities with other regions are missed. Third, as they cannot fully participate in questions and debates, they are perceived as passive participants, even though some of them make interventions through other skilled NGOs. Finally, the organization can experience frustration questioning the cost-benefit analysis of having representatives in ECOSOC meetings.

Leadership, strategy and networking

NGOs need a certain specialization in the field of international relations in order to perform in ECOSOC activities. NGOs count on its member's competencies and capacities – language skills included - to deliver their organization's speech, to undertake leadership roles and to contribute to the debate; but unfortunately they are very few. As a result, the list of LAC NGOs delegates in conferences and meetings does not differ too much from session to session. This can be positive for continuity and transition; however this can also be a risk. First, as the same people are involved in the debate, it is important to evaluate how they will report the conference back home and how they will inform and pass the message to the rest of the members of the NGO. Second, a renewal of representatives can enrich the flow of the information and may be a key factor to step forward. Third, members in an organization are transitory; NGOs have to ensure staff members are well trained and prepared to undertake participatory roles. Finally, this situation opens the debate on the nature of the participation: are NGOs participating or are individuals getting involved in ECOSOC meetings?

“The majority of NGOs in Latin America have few professional staff. Organizations operate with the help of volunteers and semi exclusive personnel. In order to participate in and to deeply know ECOSOC activities it is necessary a qualified staff with minimal knowledge of International Relations (...). United Nations system demands certain preparation and training for a full understanding of its dynamic.”

Asociación Conciencia

The learning curve for participating in ECOSOC demands not only time but also consistency. As shown in part one of this paper, intermittent and sporadic involvement are the constants of NGOs from the region and there are only a few NGOs fully using their consultative

status. For some of the NGOs consulted for this research, the reason could be explained by the fact that NGOs in the region are dedicated to solving urgent and daily issues in the “playground” itself that they lose perspective on long term and strategic planning. ECOSOC and its functional commissions provide spaces for global agenda to be discussed, constructed and disseminated and those NGOs implementing programmes and projects should be actively participating, not only because they bring their context into the discussion – as mentioned previously – but also because they can work as the channel for dissemination of the global agenda. This paradox shows how necessary outreach is to the region.

Another reason for this lack of regular participation seems to be the fact that subsidiary and related bodies of the Council fix their attention on organizations with good performance, already incorporated in the dynamic of the system. After all, the possibility of success is higher by consulting NGOs with good profiles, satisfactory results and whose locations are close to New York, Vienna or Geneva. The Council relies on very active networks – most of them with similar representative regional challenges – to select NGOs for the allocation of funds (for programmes, projects or for participation in meetings), for consultation about special and technical matters and for any other need of civil society assistance. Even though this formula optimizes time and resources, it also jeopardizes the engagement and learning process of new NGOs in the system. As a matter of fact, the majority of interviewed NGOs converge on the idea of non-inclusive practices within the Council. As a result, the participation follows the logic of a vicious circle: NGOs are consulted because they are active, and they are active because they are consulted.

“Every year we have incremented the quantity and quality of our written contributions, which motivates the interest of the United Nations Secretary and its agencies working with NGOs, who have also increased petitions for opinions and documents for consultancy.”

Yanis Cruz Gutsens – Federación de Mujeres Cubanas

Under this perspective, a factor that might explain the good performance of certain NGOs in the region could be that participation experiences before the consultative status was granted operate as leverage for upcoming performances. Indeed, some interviews bring to light this fact, but it is impossible to track in part one of this paper due to data inconsistency. Once again, NGOs must be mature enough in order to undertake concrete pragmatic actions maximizing their impact. So, the difficulty remains, on one hand, there is the capacity of adaptation of the organization and, on the other hand, there is the insufficiency of learning spaces within the Council.

Interviews also revealed that some NGOs of the region are associated with international organizations with consultative status, and some others are working in cooperation with other organizations. For instance, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era DAWN (Special Consultative Status, 1995) is a network of women scholars and activist from the South with headquarters in the Philippines, it works globally and regionally in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America and the Pacific in partnership with other NGOs and networks. Its last quadrennial report²⁰ also illustrates a strong commitment and involvement in the activities of the Council. At regional level, DAWN relies on the support of a number of established networks, organizations and institutions including *Red de Educacion Popular Entre Mujeres de America Latina y el Caribe* (REPEM), *Associacao Brasileira Interdisciplinar de AIDS* (ABIA) and

Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) ²¹. In this way, being in partnership with DAWN allows LAC NGOs to participate in the Council as the case of Magda Lanuza²², one of its former members and working in Nicaragua in the organization *Iniciativa contra los Agronegocios* and *Agribusiness Accountability Initiative (AAI)*. Thus, networking is an effective tool that allows NGOs of the region to participate in the Council under the umbrella of other organizations and also permits NGOs to overcome capacity challenges by relying on the structure and resources of stronger organizations. Certainly, organizations in the same network will share similar core values and vision, but they can be confronted by the interest of the leading organization for remaining visible and dominant. NGOs' delegates may informally represent their regions, but formally, they respond to the name of the NGO with consultative status.

2.3 Evaluating the Interface

A dysfunctional interface between the Council and civil society is the third reason for weak participation tackled in this research. For the following analysis, a special focus on the interaction between the NGO Branch and civil society will show some crucial issues needed to be improved upon.

Managing the benefits of consultative status

At this point in the research it is possible to affirm that there is a discrepancy with the expectations from both sides. On one hand, NGOs expect substantive changes such as regular participation in events, prestige and improvement of their image in public and private sectors in

²⁰ Economic and Social Council, Quadrennial reports 2002-2005 submitted through the Secretary-General pursuant to Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31, 14 November 2006, E/C.2/2007/2/Add.15. Available at <http://documents.un.org/>

²¹ Thomas (2006), p.433-434

²² Interview on June 2009

order to access funding programmes, and a relationship with United Nations based on coordinated and structured actions. On the other hand, the Council is expecting reliable NGOs mature and capable enough to undertake proactive participation and fast adaptation in its system. In other words, both parties are expecting a lot, but very little is being exchanged.

An explanation for this inconsistency seems to be the lack of clear information about the benefits of having consultative status; instead, the message is imprecise and vague. Within the last years the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service²³ has improved the dissemination of information for civil society, yet this effort has not been enough. The broad system of United Nation Offices, Agencies, Programmes, Funds and Specialized Agencies²⁴ offering spaces for non-governmental players seems to be too confusing; participation within these instances is decentralized and with particular demands and approaches to NGOs. In addition, a disarticulated work concerning NGOs between functional commissions and subsidiaries bodies of ECOSOC could leave the door open to misunderstandings of whether certain commissions and bodies are part of EOCOSC and consequently, it could narrow the perceived benefits of participation.

Nevertheless, this difficulty would not prevent the NGO Branch from adopting a clear message on general benefits to motivate NGO applications. On the contrary, the Branch focuses the information on details of the accreditation process and is not providing details on how to use the consultative status. Thus, it seems there is a misconception about what having consultative status represents: is it the final outcome or the tool for including civil society in the Council activities?

²³ <http://www.un-ngls.org/>

When communication goes wrong

Communication is essential and critical for the interface between NGOs and the Council. However, communication has broken down in several ways and for several reasons.

First of all, because of the discrepancy between the two expectations explained above, both parties may experience difficulties encoding and decoding messages, resulting in unfavorable responses.

Another concern is the time of communication; it seems that the application process is when both parties experience intensive contact –the priority is to prepare applications in accordance with provisions and guidelines of resolution 1996/31– but after status is granted, communication is interrupted. This *modus operandi* reveals a lack of communicative sensitivity, not only because of language skills issues previously tackled, but also because it is not appreciated that communication needs to take place. Conversely, the finalization of the accreditation process constitutes the beginning of a long term relationship that must be enriched through successful and effective communication.

Poor systems and tools could explain ineffective communication; however there is evidence of strong channels at the disposition of NGOs that are not being exploited, UN-NGO-IRENE²⁵ is one good example. The region shows almost no involvement in this network, the list of IRENE coordinators as of November 2008²⁶ counts only one NGO coordinating Latin America (World Family Organization) and one coordinating the Caribbean (Haitian Foundation for Habitat and the Integration of the Homeless). In contrast, there are six coordinators for Africa, four for Eastern Europe and three for Arab States.

²⁴ For more information, please refer to *UN System Engagement with NGOs, Civil Society, the Private Sector, and Others Actors. A Compendium*, available at <http://www.un-ngls.org/spip.php?article886>

²⁵ <http://esango.un.org/irene/Index>

²⁶ <http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/ngo/>

The perception NGOs have of the Council as a coordinating entity make NGOs forget that communication is a two-way process. NGOs have to evolve from passive receptors to proactive organizations. A major part of the interviewed NGOs claimed that the Council does not inform them about dates and venues of conferences and meetings, or if they do, not within enough time to perform fundraising activities. This argument is contradicted by the fact that almost all meetings and sessions take place in the same month every year and that they are planned more than one year in advance, so it is possible to know the venue and the dates ahead of time. For instance, sessions of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues²⁷ has been taking place in May in New York for the last eight years, and the sessions of the Commission on the Status of Woman²⁸ has been organized in March since 1994 and its fifty-fourth session will take place on 1-12 March 2010. Therefore, NGOs have to show interested in being informed and they have to work internally with its members about their relationship with the Council and its subsidiaries bodies.

Consequently, the Council must also consider its role as a good receptor for ideas, proposals and complaints. Interviews with NGOs show frustration and disappointment. In some cases feedback is not received when they make contact with the NGO Branch asking for issuance of passes, proposing ways of cooperation or any other signs of proactive communication.

Finally, this broken communication may explain the repetitive statement in the interviews about an apparent loss and deterioration of LAC NGOs' interest in the Council: “se lo ve (Naciones Unidas) como algo lejano”, translated as “United Nations are perceived very distant”.

²⁷ <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/>

²⁸ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/>

3. Recommendations for an outreach plan

The main objective of an outreach plan for the region is to increase the number of LAC NGOs applications and to activate the participation of those already granted with status. In this way, the following recommendations are based on a synergy approach capable of articulating efforts to deliver results effectively and consistently.

3.1 Transforming opportunities into assets

As stated earlier, by recognizing the issues NGOs in the region are interested in, the right channel for its participation may be provided. LAC NGOs granted special status represent 70% of NGOs with consultative status in the region. Therefore, it would be an asset to define for each of them a primary thematic area in order to deliver a list of specific NGOs to its matching functional commissions or subsidiaries bodies of ECOSOC, not only in headquarters but also in regional commissions and in national offices. This exercise could boost participation in many ways. First, commissions and bodies are alerted to the existence of specialized NGOs in the region waiting to be consulted. Second, NGOs are visible candidates for funding programmes. Third, a classification is useful to target dissemination of meetings and conferences. And finally it helps to track performance and to build statistics of the region.

Through the development of the present paper, it was revealed that gender is one of the main concerns of LAC NGOs. Not only are the sessions of Commission on the Status of Woman the most frequently attended but there is also an important activism of gender organizations within the region. *Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and empowerment of women* is the theme of the Annual Ministerial Review (AMR)²⁹ for 2010. The assumption that a big number of NGOs – with and without consultative

²⁹ The Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) is a function of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) mandated by Heads of State and Government at the 2005 World Summit, for more information <http://www.un.org/ecosoc/newfunc/amr.shtml>

status – will turn their attention to ECOSOC may alert the NGO Branch of an opportunity to increase applications and to activate participation.

The NGO Branch may also consider getting in contact with the Department of Public Information (DPI). This instance manages also a certification formula and some of its accredited LAC NGOs may be potential candidates to offer them consultative status. In this way, NGOs with expertise in the United Nations system can not only increase their numbers, but also quality of their participation.

In addition, the moment an organization makes contact with the NGO Branch should be seen as an opportunity to strengthen the relationship, especially by giving the right assistance and feedback. Southern NGOs that reach the premises of the NGO Branch have been through a long process of preparation, as explained in the second part of this research, and sometimes they expect to take advantage of their participation in meetings to get in touch with ECOSOC for an exchange of ideas and an increase in the impact of their projects.

Furthermore, Latin American and Caribbean members of the NGO Committee may also contribute to promotional campaigns. Table 5 chart shows the percentage of NGOs accredited when the chairmanship of the Committee on NGOs was detained by their country of origin. There is evidence that the chairmanships of Tunisia and Iran might have influenced the number of total accreditation. On the contrary, Colombian and Sudan chairmanships show low performances in absolute numbers, even though they might be strong in relative numbers.

Even though further research is needed to affirm that there is a correlation between the geographical origin of the chairmanship and the increment in applications, having members of the Committee from LAC countries could be an asset to encourage applications in the region. As

for the 2008-2009 period, four Members States from the region are part of the Committee: Colombia, Cuba, Peru and Dominica.

Table 5. NGOs accredited when the chairmanship of the Committee on NGOs was detained by their country of origin

Period	Country detaining chairmanship	Total country accreditations (June 2009)	Country accreditations during Chairmanship	Percentage of NGOs accredited during chairmanship
1998-1999	Tunisia	35	12	34%
2000-2001	Turkey	19	2	11%
2002-2003	Romania	11	0	0%
2004-2005	Iran	22	9	41%
2006-2007	Colombia	5	1	20%
2008-2009	Sudan	11	2	18%

Source: NGO Branch/DESA

3.2 Taking ECOSOC into the region

Working at regional level is a strategy to reduce capacity challenges of LAC NGOs, especially scarcity of resources and language problems. The NGO Branch can adopt several decentralized actions in order to reach NGOs in their own playground.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)³⁰ and the United Nations Information Centres (UNICs) can be used as vehicles for the dissemination of information about consultative status.

UNICs in Latin America and Caribbean are based in Asuncion, Bogota, Buenos Aires, La Paz, Lima, Mexico city, Panama city, Port of Spain and Rio de Janeiro; having some other countries in charge where UNICs are not available. UNICs' website points out the objective of "reaching the peoples of the world and to share the United Nations story with them in their own languages (...) by translating information materials into local languages"³¹. Nevertheless, when

³⁰ With headquarters in Chile and subregional offices in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Trinidad, Uruguay and Washington, D.C.

³¹ <http://unic.un.org/aroundworld/unics/en/index.asp>

looking at the civil society link on the WebPages of the nine LAC UNICs³², there is a big contradiction about the importance of providing information in local languages. For instance, there is no link for civil society issues on the site for Colombia, Trinidad, Bolivia and Panama. Paraguay and Peru have some information about civil society but with only a couple of lines of explanation about consultative status ending with a link to the NGO Branch site which only have French and English versions. Argentina focuses on the DPI accreditation process, it is the only one providing forms in Spanish for such a process. Brazil provides global statistics on consultative status and general information about requirements for applications, but not enough about benefits and how to apply. Concerning ECLAC's websites, no information about consultative status is provided³³.

The big lesson of this reality is that there are vehicles without proper messages. The NGO Branch should translate some documents into Spanish and upload them to these websites. Applications forms, FAQs about consultative status, a manual or a tool kit about the application process and benefits could improve the understanding about how civil society works with ECOSOC, even if NGOs will eventually need to use English in order to apply for status or participate in events

Another way to cooperate with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean is using the organization of national level campaigns to increase applications in the region. The NGO Branch could also decentralize in ECLAC's premises, the revising phase of the application process. In other words, the regional Commission could receive applications in the local language, revise them, contact and help applicant NGOs to obtain the necessary information and clarifications to enable them to complete their accreditation procedures, and

³² Retrieved July 2009 from <http://unic.un.org/aroundworld/unics/en/index.asp>

³³ <http://www.eclac.org/>

once the application is ready to be submitted to the NGO Committee, NGOs could finally translate their dossiers in English and send it to New York. This modality would not only solve financial and communication issues, but also would establish a valuable first contact with local Commissions. Since the current problem for NGOs is the mobility to New York, Geneva and/or Vienna, NGOs with consultative status should work more closely with the country offices of agencies as a strategy to activate participation and involvement of the region in the ECOSOC system. This local involvement may also lead the way forward to international participation.

The NGO Branch has developed some interactive tools to bring NGOs closer to consultative status, such as event management systems, best practices networks, including UN-NGO-IRENE, all of them are easy to access, but with few NGOs of the region actually using them. Evidently, for NGOs with few language skills the use of these tools may be restricted. However, NGOs already participating in ECOSOC activities should be motivated to use them, and the easiest and fastest way is by planning an email campaign. This campaign should highlight the practical benefits of using these tools, but also the abstract benefits such as prestige and visibility.

In addition, there are some actors in the region, besides ECLAC, that can be providers of regional training, capacity building and workshops, specially universities and research institutions. For instance the Latin American School of Social Sciences (FLACSO) founded in 1957 by the initiative of UNESCO regroup prestige scholars and is based in twelve countries of the region.

Finally, it is important to point out that any effort to provide outreach to the region is conditioned by the reciprocated cooperation of NGOs.

3.3 Learning from others

The NGO Branch should consult with United Nation Offices, Agencies, Programmes, Funds and Specialized Agencies working efficiently with NGOs. The Branch can learn from them and may replicate good practices in its outreach programme, and if necessary, a task force team could be implemented (including representatives of LAC NGOs).

The Branch may also plan research on best case practices of LAC organizations with outstanding performances, as they are few, the study would not take too much time and effort. This research may reveal critical success factors to work with inactive NGOs. Also, very active NGOs could serve as vehicles to attract NGOs with similar profiles. Having enough capacity, these NGOs should be offered as coordinators for a networking strategy in the region. Earlier in this research, it was shown how NGOs reduce their capacity challenge by working together, which is why the region should have their own networks to solve discrepancies in representation, generate synergy and boost participation.

3.4 Strategic planning

Goal setting and measurement systems should be including in an outreach programme. It is important to focus on a strategic plan to really start generating an increased tendency in annual evolution of the number of LAC NGOs accreditations. Concerning participation, qualitative indicators are more difficult to collect, that is why it is important for NGOs to use interactive tools to register its activities.

Conclusion

Data analysis has proved that the Latin-America and the Caribbean region experiences weak civil society participation in terms of numbers of NGO's accredited with consultative status and also in terms of involvement in formal and informal activities with the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

Several reasons explain this condition. First, the current political and social situation in the region may be strengthening civil society institutionalization, which leads organizations to focus on national and regional issues. Second, capacity challenges, especially scarcity or financial resources and English skills, are preventing NGOs from fully participation in activities of the Council, and also discourage applications of new organizations. Third, a dysfunctional interface seems to restrain information flow, which is crucial with long distance communication.

An action plan to expand outreach in the region should directly respond to the specific problems NGOs are facing. On one hand the NGO Branch should deliver a clear message on the benefits of consultative status through the right channels. But on the other hand, proactive NGOs are needed to activate tools, to cooperate with agencies offices and to apply for consultative status.

It has been revealed that a multitude of factors come into play regarding the problematic issues of both parties; NGOs and ECOSOC need to be aware of their own responsibilities and weaknesses in order to construct a feasible outreach plan.

The present paper should be considered on an exploratory basis, it provides some insights on the problematic areas for future analysis and research.

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