

**MEETING TO LAUNCH
THE INFORMAL REGIONAL NETWORK OF AFRICAN NGOS
AND BUILD THEIR CAPACITIES**

Hammamet, Tunisia, 8 – 11 January 2002

Background

In April 2001, a meeting in Aracaju, Brazil, formally launched the UN Informal Regional Network of NGOs (UN-NGO-IRENE). This initiative, spearheaded by the NGO Section of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs was designed to address a problem of growing concern in this age of global development based on easy access to and exchange of information and communication as well as a better use of new technologies' potential for the NGO sector development.

As a result of the Economic and Social Council's emphasis on the importance of a representative and inclusive NGO relationship, consultative status is being granted to a steadily increasing number of organizations from countries and regions that provide geographical diversity, but are often economically distressed. A significant number of organizations, therefore, find themselves subject to financial and logistical constraints that effectively limit their ability to make full use of their consultative status with ECOSOC, particularly in regard to participation in the international arena.

One underlying problem has always been the difficulty of establishing and maintaining regular contact between the NGO Section in New York and the large number of NGOs with limited communication systems. These organizations are therefore deprived of up to date information on UN activities in the economic and social fields and the electronic systems of communication that has become a trademark of the increasingly influential NGO sector.

To address this problem, the UN Informal NGO Regional Network was designed as a means of drawing even the smallest, most isolated organizations into a system that provides information and support and the opportunity for sharing expertise and resources of every description to support joint NGO activities within and among regions thereby enhancing their significance and strengthening their impact. One of the most important aims of the proposed network is the possibility of providing national and regional organizations with the practical tools to make a tangible contribution to the work of ECOSOC both operationally and by adding a broad-based NGO perspective to the deliberations of that body, particularly the discussions of the High Level Segment. It is intended that the networking capacity will be exploited to the fullest in following up the outcome of the major international meetings, particularly of the Millennium Summit that resulted in a declaration of the political will of the world's leaders to achieve certain objectives for the betterment of humankind.

UN-NGO-IRENE will be supported through the intermediary activities of designated regional and sub-regional coordinator organizations. During the Aracaju meeting, such organizations have already been identified for Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. The Tunisia Meeting aimed to agree on five African NGOs to serve as sub-regional coordinators and one of them as regional coordinator. For the remaining regions, the network will be expanded similarly to cover the whole sector of NGOs.

Additionally, the interest sparked by the concept of UN-NGO-IRENE itself has attracted a number of UN and other intergovernmental and large international bodies to seek synergy and mutually supportive action for the NGO Section/DESA, as informal partners in its implementation.

The priority accorded by the international community to addressing its special development needs made Africa the foremost choice for the inauguration of the regional informal network activities. The concern of the President of the Economic and Social Council, His Excellency Mr. Belinga Eboutou, for the full mobilization of the entire region's NGO community together with the full support of DESA ensured that the meeting to launch the African UN-NGO-IRENE received support from the highest level and brought together an inclusive representation of Africa's most able non-governmental organizations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The meeting on “Capacity building for the Informal Regional Network in Africa” launched the Informal Regional Network of African NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC/United Nations (UN-NGO-IRENE/Africa). It took place in Hammamet, Tunisia from 8 to 11 January 2002.

Held under the patronage of His Excellency Mr. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, President of the Republic of Tunisia, the meeting was organized by the Women’s Association Tunisia 21, and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Following the welcoming address of Mrs. Faouzia Belajouza, President of “Tunisia 21” and the comprehensive introduction of Mrs. Hanifa Mezoui, Chief NGO Section/DESA, Mr. Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, Minister of State and Special Advisor to His Excellency the President of the Republic of Tunisia together with Mr. Patrizio Civili, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs/DESA opened the meeting. Mrs. Naziha Ben Yedder, Minister for Women Affairs and the Family together with Ambassador Belinga Eboutou, President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) closed the meeting.

Participants included:

- ◆ **Representatives of 15 African NGOs** from the five African sub-regions and of two NGOs representing the Tunisian NGOs with consultative status with ECOSOC;
- ◆ **Officials from the United Nations Secretariat:** Department of Economic and Social Affairs {NGO Section/Division for ECOSOC Support and Coordination, Division for Public Economics and Public Administration (DPEPA), Office of the Special Coordinator for Africa and the Least Developed Countries (OSCAL)}, Department for Public Information (DPI), and the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA);
- ◆ **Partners:** Conference on NGOs in consultative relationship with the United Nations (CONGO), World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA), International Association of Economic and Social Councils (AICESIS), African Union and Economic and Social Councils (UCESA) and the African Development Bank (ADB);

In addition, representatives of ACE International Japan Incorporated and of 30 Tunisian NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC took part at the meeting as observers.

The meeting agreed on the relevance and the need for an Informal Regional Network of NGOs in Africa. NGO representatives noticed that such an initiative was a timely one.

It was agreed that the primary focus for the Network should be on the African NGOs with consultative status with ECOSOC (now 162), but that it needed to go beyond this to

include all NGOs supporting the goals of the United Nations, notably as set out in the Millennium Declaration.

Emphasis was given to the need for the Network to be quickly operational, taking into account existing NGO networks in the region and those that give African NGOs access to global networks. One of the important added values of this Network would also be its responsiveness to the diversity of Africa and the priority given to engaging with NGOs at the local level.

Consideration was given to the need for a Charter, including guiding principles, to define the scope of the Network and responsibilities of participating NGOs. The Women's Association Tunisia 21, as the regional coordinator, was asked to take responsibility for this in collaboration with Mrs Najet Karaborni, Senior Interregional Adviser/DESA and UN-NGO-IRENE Project Coordinator.

Participating NGOs stressed the vital importance of mobilizing additional resources in order to realize the Network's potential. Information about sources of funding could be disseminated through the Network.

Following substantial and candid discussions, the meeting agreed on the following major issues:

The Objectives

The following objectives were agreed:

1. To strengthen partnerships between the United Nations, NGOs, sub-regional and regional coordinators;
2. To build needed capacity among NGOs as well as reinforce existing skills and develop human resources;
3. To help build a sound resource base, including to strengthen the networking among NGOs, notably the use of ICT;
4. To establish a permanent dialogue and direct contacts between NGOs, the NGO Section/DESA and the United Nations in general;
5. To strengthen relationships among African NGOs;
6. To assist in creating a conducive environment for NGOs to operate.

Selection Criteria

The following are the criteria for selection of NGOs to serve as sub-regional coordinators:

1. Consultative status with ECOSOC, obtained or requested
2. Recognized experience in one or more priority African issues
3. Established headquarters and an executive officer able to work on behalf of the Network
4. Sufficient human resources and technological support to undertake activities in support of the Network
5. A good record of and capacity for collaborating and communicating with NGOs in the region.

Structure

It was agreed that the structure of the Network would be flexible and open, and optimize the use of ICT. Much of the actual networking would be conducted through the Internet. Local radio would also be used in specific contexts. It was considered necessary to set up a Web portal for the Network, which could host websites for participating NGOs, and facilitate information sharing activities. The structure would reflect the interdependence between all levels – local, national, sub-regional regional and global – and encourage multi-directional flows of information, focused on the goals and programs of the United Nations system.

Designation of coordinators

The following NGOs were designated to serve as **sub-regional coordinators**:

- ◆ **North Africa** – Women’s Association Tunisia 21 (Tunisia)
- ◆ **West Africa** – Coalition of Families for the Fight Against AIDS and Poverty (Burkina Faso)
- ◆ **Central Africa** – The League for Education of Women and Children (Cameroon)
- ◆ **East Africa** – United Nations Association-Ethiopia (Ethiopia)
- ◆ **Southern Africa** – Angola Network for Poverty Reduction (Angola)

In addition, the Women’s Association Tunisia 21 was designated to serve as the **regional coordinator for Africa**.

These positions would be rotated every two years. Serving as the African regional coordinator would be the privilege of the NGO that hosted the following meeting of the Informal African NGO Network.

Strategic Action Plan

The meeting concluded with a discussion of a Strategic Action Plan, which included the goals and activities proposed by participating NGOs, partners, the NGO Section/DESA and the other UN officials. The Strategic Action Plan will be included in the final report of the meeting.

Contribution of the partners and of the NGO Section/DESA

In addition to the detailed proposals to be included in the Strategic Action Plan, partners of the Network would contribute to the flow of information.

The NGO Section of DESA would provide a range of services, including regular flows of information to assist NGOs in making full use of their consultative status with ECOSOC. It was proposed that a Network newsletter be produced.