

African NGOs Create Regional Network to Improve Interaction with the UN

Hamamet, Tunisia, 11 January 2002 – A diverse group of Non-Governmental Organizations from all parts of Africa has established an Informal Regional Network of NGOs with the aim to improve communications and strengthen partnership with the United Nations, particularly with the intergovernmental committees and commissions of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the key policy making body of the UN in the areas of economic and social development.

Fifteen African NGOs representing the five African sub-regions and a number of Tunisian NGOs, most of them in consultative status with ECOSOC (See list attached), met with UN officials and other partners to work out the so-called UN Informal Regional Network of NGOs (UN-NGO-IRENE). The initiative, spearheaded by the NGO Section of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), is designed to ensure a two-way flow of information between networks of NGOs in Africa and the UN system.

The NGO Network for the African region is the first of several regional networks that were proposed at the inaugural meeting of the worldwide NGO Informal Regional Network (UN-NGO-IRENE) that took place in April 2001, in Aracaju, Brazil. At that time, NGOs to serve as coordinators were identified for Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean.

One of the functions of this Network is to provide NGOs with the necessary tools to contribute to the work of ECOSOC both operationally and by adding a broad-based NGO perspective to the deliberations of that body. It is intended that the networking capacity be exploited to the fullest in following up the outcome of all major international meetings, particularly the outcome 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.

According to Mr. Patrizio Civili, Assistant-Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs, DESA, who addressed the meeting, the establishment of the Network comes at a time when a significant number of organizations 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.

At the meeting entitled "Capacity Building for the Informal Regional Network in Africa", it was agreed that there would be five sub-regional NGO coordinators for the African Network. These would be NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC with experience in one or more priority African issues. They also need sufficient human resources and technological support to undertake activities in support of the Network and a good record of and capacity for collaborating and communicating with NGOs in the region.

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 will be rotated every two years.

Following substantial and candid discussions, the meeting agreed on the Network’s key objectives, which aim:

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 information and communications technology (ICT);
4. To establish a permanent dialogue and direct contacts among the 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.

It was agreed that the structure of the Network would be flexible and open, and would 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 among 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 systems. It was also proposed that a Network newsletter be produced.

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.

Held under the patronage of His Excellency Mr. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, President of the Republic of Tunisia, the three-day 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 and Ambassador Belinga Eboutou, President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), closed the meeting.

Underscoring the importance of this initiative, the meeting was attended by UN officials including representatives 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).

Other partners included representatives from the Conference on NGOs in consultative relationship with the United Nations (CONGO), the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA), the International Association of Economic and Social Councils (AICESIS), the African Union and Economic and Social Councils (UCESA) and the African Development Bank. In addition, 30 Tunisian NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC and ACE International Japan, Inc. took part in the meeting as observers.

Underlining the relevance and the need for an Informal Regional Network of NGOs in Africa, NGO representatives noted that such an initiative was a timely one and 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 United Nations Millennium Declaration of Heads of State in September 2000.

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. The existing network of UN offices in Africa, particularly the Information Centres of the UN Department of Public Information, will also provide support to the network. An important added value 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.

According to Mrs. Mezoui of the NGO Section/DESA, the Network addresses the longstanding difficulty of establishing and maintaining regular contact between the NGO Section in New York and the large number of NGOs with limited communications 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.

UN-NGO-IRENE will be supported through the intermediary activities of designated regional and sub-regional coordinator NGOs. In addition to the NGOs already designated to serve as regional and sub-regional coordinators, the network, for the remaining regions, 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 with 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 informal regional 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 some of Africa's most able non-governmental organizations.

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MEETING ON “CAPACITY BUILDING FOR THE INFORMAL REGIONAL NETWORK IN AFRICA” (HAMAMMET, TUNISIA, 8-11 JANVIER 2002)

LIST OF NGOs

- **African Women’s Development and Communication Network (FEMNET):**
Sara Longwe, Zambie
- **Angolan Network for Poverty Reduction (RARP):**
Domningos Antonio Dodge, Angola
- **Arab Lawyer Union (ALU):**
Tahany El Gibaly, Egypte
- **Association Algérienne d’Alphabétisation:**
Aicha Barki, Algérie
- **Association Femme et Développement (AFD):**
Amel Ben Daly, Tunisie
- **Association Internationale de Lutte contre la Pauvreté et pour le Développement (AIPED):**
Ibrahima Seydou Gueye, Sénégal
Gaspere Giallo, Italie
Françoise Hergine Ramiranjanjarisoa, Sénégal
- **Association Féminine “Tunisie 21”**
Faouzia Belajouza, Tunisie
Hayet Zaara, Tunisie
- **Association Tunisienne des Mères**
Saida Agrebi, Tunisie
- **Coalition des Familles dans la lutte contre le SIDA et la pauvreté (COFAL):**
Kadidia Sall, Burkina Faso
- **Collectif National des ONG du Gabon (CNAONG):**
Célestine Ndong Nguema, Gabon
- **Comité d’Information et de Liaison des ONG (CILONG):**
Mahamat Ahmat Abakar, Tchad
- **Environmental Development in the Third World (ENDA):**

Samy Badia, Maroc

- **Femme Afrique Solidarité (FAS):**
Salimata Dieng Diop, Suisse
- **Fondation Chantal Biya:**
Jean-Stéphane Biatcha, Cameroun
Boniface Fontem Nkobena, Cameroun
- **Les Amis du Pangolin:**
Serge Akagah, Gabon
- **Ligue pour l'Education de la Femme et de l'Enfant (LEFE):**
Pauline Biyong, Cameroun
- **National NGO Coalition of South Africa (SANGOCO):**
Moshe More, Afrique du Sud
- **Organization of African Trade Unions Unity (OATUU):**
Augustin Mujyambere, Ghana
- **United Nations Associations of Ethiopia (UNAE):**
Mussie Hailu, Ethiopie