

**The United Nations and Global Democracy:
From Discourse to Deeds**

by

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On October 17, 2007, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon led the largest political demonstration in history. Together with 43.7 million people in 127 countries, Ban stood up to ‘speak out against poverty’ (2007). Coordinated by the UN and a wide range of civil society organizations, the demonstration was held to call on political leaders around the world to honour their pledge to meet the Millennium Development Goals. The so-called ‘Stand Up’ event is a telling example of growing UN efforts in favour of a more participatory and more democratic global order. Surprisingly, these efforts have so far received little attention from students of international politics. To help correct this paucity, our article seeks to explain why and how, over the last two decades, the idea of global democracy has been a driving force in the work of the UN.

Global democracy is a highly contentious concept in world politics. As Barry Holden recalls, ‘what global democracy is, and to what extent its existence is likely or desirable, are matters about which there is considerable controversy’ (2000: 1). Within the UN context, the term has at times referred to an inter-state project whose goal is to grant all states, large and small, the fullest opportunity to

participate in global decision-making, based on the principles of the UN Charter (Boutros-Ghali, 1994: par. 134; Annan, 2002a: 139). In recent years, however, UN discourse has considerably broadened the notion of global democracy so as to address the need to give non-state actors the ‘means of participation in the formal system’ (Boutros-Ghali, 1996a: 25; see also Archibugi, 1998a: 223-24). Our analysis focuses on this second, more societal, conception of global democracy. In stressing the role of non-state actors — NGOs, the private sector, local authorities, and parliamentarians, among others — the bottom-up vision of global democracy defended by the UN is consistent with the interpretation of those who view global democracy as a process aimed at creating ‘new institutional channels that will allow popular participation and the political control over global choices to be increased’ (Archibugi, 2008: xvi). Often identified as the key challenge for the future of multilateral cooperation (Cox, 1997; Knight, 1999; O’Brien et al., 2000; Cooper and Legler, 2006), the advancement of global participatory democracy has also been portrayed as ‘a new task of our time’ (Boutros-Ghali, 1996a: 25) by former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Though arguably a remote prospect, global democracy understood as a truly inclusive form of world political organization has now become an integral part of the debate on global governance and the UN system.

Our analysis draws on three bodies of scholarly literature associated with the fields of international relations, political theory, and public policy. The approach we have adopted is modeled, first and foremost, on recent research

that emphasizes the importance of the production of ideas by international organizations. Due to their roles in setting the global agenda, establishing norms, and socializing international agents, international institutions are recognized to a growing extent as intellectual actors (Emmerij et al., 2001). This has been the case in particular for the UN, and was the analytical starting point of the UN Intellectual History Project (UNIHP), initiated in 1999 by Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas Weiss.¹ UNIHP collaborators have published over ten books, which show that social and economic ideas 'are arguably the most important legacy of the UN' (Emmerij et al., 2001: 3), and that UN ideas 'have had a significant influence on national and international action' (Jolly et al., 2005: 3). Following a similar line of thought, we propose to demonstrate that the UN actively supports the idea of global democracy. To this end, we, like Emmerij, Jolly, and Weiss, adopt the view that the UN, far from being a unitary actor, encompasses at least 'two United Nations': the intergovernmental forum and the international civil service (2001: 6). Our article is centered mainly on the discourse and policies promoted by the latter.

The writings of democratic theorists provide a second analytical cornerstone for this study. It must be said at the outset that, among the many changes democratic theory has undergone in the past twenty years, one of the most consequential is undoubtedly the assumption that democracy now 'has to be understood in a way much more extensive than the traditional narrowly state-based idea of it involves' (Archibugi et al., 2000: 127). In the wake of this

reconceptualization, scholars have paid more attention to global democracy. Noting that the locus of political authority as well as the 'contours of political communities' (Held, 2000: 26) are being transformed, several analysts have suggested that the current period corresponds to a 'new historical phase' (Higgott and Ougaard, 2002: 10), featuring the emergence of democracy 'as a powerful international ethos' (Archibugi, 1998b: 246). Democratic theorists have carried out a systematic investigation of the factors that call for the globalization of democracy. The results of their work have strongly informed UN discourse and constituted a guide to identifying and re-constructing the foundations of UN ideology.

Third, our analysis also draws on public policy debates about democratic legitimization. More specifically, Fritz Scharpf's famous distinction between input- and output-oriented legitimizing beliefs offers a useful instrument to clarify the UN approach toward global democracy (Scharpf, 1999: 6). According to Scharpf, the 'input' aspect of legitimacy refers to the notion of government 'by the people'. It bears on the capacity of a political system to reflect the preferences of the members of a community. By contrast, the 'output' component of legitimacy relates to the notion of government 'for the people', and derives from the capacity of a political system to solve problems and to increase public welfare. As in the case of a democratic nation-state, we argue that UN policies in favour of global democracy always seek to maximize both input- and output-based legitimacy. Scharpf's theorizing, which coincides with the classic distinction between the UN's

‘forum’ and ‘service’ functions (Cox and Jacobson, 1973), has helped us differentiate between the policies that regulate UN deliberations and those that encourage operational partnerships.

Briefly put, our study looks at UN ideas on global democracy as expressed in the organization’s discourse and policies. It focuses on the post-Cold War period, since it was from the 1990s onward that the notion of global democracy truly rose to prominence on the UN agenda. The first part of the article uses official rhetoric — mainly statements emanating from the Secretariat — to explain how the UN’s promotion of global democracy rests on a particular set of values and beliefs. In an analysis that parallels the interpretation proposed by cosmopolitan democratic theorists, the UN leadership argues that international governance must be democratized in order to reflect the recent reconfiguration of political forces. Our discussion then goes on to examine how UN ideas are put into practice through global public policies. This second part, which is structured according to the distinction between input- and output-based legitimacy, shows that UN policies foster greater participation by non-state actors in the organization’s deliberations and operations. The article helps to better understand the role played by the UN as an intellectual actor. By promoting the greater involvement of global constituencies in world politics, the discourse and policies of the UN have indeed succeeded in advancing the idea of a democracy ‘without borders’.

Global Democracy: A New Priority for the UN

UN leaders, like many democratic theorists, argue for the strengthening of global democracy on historical and normative grounds. From a historical viewpoint, the UN explains, the international order is presently undergoing unprecedented political, economic, and social transformations. Furthermore, on the normative level, democracy is becoming the paramount legitimizing principle of world politics. Each of these sets of factors warrants closer examination.

An International Order in Transition

For the UN, a defining feature of contemporary politics is that 'the new world environment has strengthened [the] fundamental link between democratization nationally and internationally' (Boutros-Ghali, 1996a: 27). This position echoes that of experts who hold, 'it is no longer possible for democratic states to be fully democratic in a non-democratic international system' (Bienen et al., 1998: 288). Four distinct elements have led the UN to put global democracy on its agenda: the end of the Cold War, the third wave of democratization, globalization, and the rise of new international actors. These make up the historical backdrop to the UN's global democracy project.

In the early 1990s, Boutros-Ghali noted that the end of the Cold War necessitated the materialization of a 'new system for international relations' (1996b) where it would be possible to consider 'not only geopolitical issues, but economic behaviour and social and cultural aspirations' (1996a: 30). The

broadening of democracy was clearly one of those aspirations. The UN's analysis was consistent with the widespread recognition that the fall of Communism had brought to light previously hidden global issues, and created a 'disposition to debate and reflect upon the future of world order' (Falk, 1999: 11). In accord with scholars who saw the termination of the Cold War as an opportunity to establish a less hierarchic international system, UN leaders emphasized that this historic event had 'fostered a new spirit of dialogue and cooperation at the global political level' (United Nations, 1997: 11). In fact, the euphoria generated by the end of the East-West conflict facilitated the emergence of all manner of political utopias, ranging from the end of history to the advent of global democracy. The UN, whose whole history had been shaped by the Cold War dynamics, was particularly quick to share the optimism of the moment.

The UN believes as well that with the third wave of democratization, democracy has become a 'universal right', which 'does not belong to any country or region' (Annan, 2005: 38; see also Boutros-Ghali, 1994; Falk, 1998: 314). While the persistence of various authoritarian regimes and 'illiberal democracies' (Zakaria, 1997) points to the considerable obstacles standing in the way of this universal right, the UN's commitment on the issue remains as steadfast as ever. This commitment has given rise to two types of complementary initiatives. As of 1990, on the one hand, the UN started to actively promote national democracy with a wide range of technical assistance programs. Under the guidance of

Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, who acted as a norm entrepreneur (Rushton, 2008), the UN Secretariat played an 'impressive role of international agent for democratization' (Joyner, 1999: 333). On the other hand, due to a spillover effect, the UN gradually established a connection between its activities in support of national democracy and the promotion of global democracy. This connection rested on the conviction that an undemocratic international system could undermine efforts in favour of national democratization. Indeed, making his own the belief that 'local democracy is not feasible without global democracy' (Alger, 2003: 103; see also McGrew, 2000: 406), Boutros-Ghali suggested that 'democratization within states may fail to take root unless democratization extends to the international arena' (1996b). In line with this argument, the UN General Assembly's adoption in 2003 of a resolution proclaiming 'the right to equitable participation of all, without any discrimination, in domestic and global decision-making' (UNGA, 2003) has lent weight to the notion that the universal right to democracy should not be confined within state borders.²

The UN approach toward democracy has also been strongly influenced by the forces of globalization. Along with many experts, the world body affirms that with globalization, 'common public policy challenges (...) cross both national borders and institutional boundaries' (Annan, 2002b: 19). In this changing context, new forms of collective action appear necessary for both political and economic reasons. From a political standpoint, the UN maintains that governance has to be modernized, for 'the threats we face are interconnected'

(Annan, 2005: 25). In the words of former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, 'no State, however powerful, can protect itself on its own' (2005: 7). The UN suggests as well that the international economic order, which is the source of growing inequalities, needs to be transformed. 'To survive and thrive', Kofi Annan explained, 'a global economy (...) must advance broader, and more inclusive, social purposes' (2000: 10). Faced with these combined political and economic pressures, the UN has concluded that globalization needs not only stronger but also more democratic systems of regulation.

Finally, the UN considers that the rise of new actors, which is 'both a hallmark and a cause of our changing international environment' (Annan, 1998: 2), demands a reform of global governance and a redistribution of political power. UN officials have repeatedly pointed out that civil society and the private sector, '[b]oth occupy an increasingly large and important share of the space formerly reserved for States alone' (Annan, 2005: 6). The organization has openly applauded the fact that citizens everywhere have found 'new channels of political expression and activity' through NGOs and transnational movements (Boutros-Ghali, 1996a: 28). By bringing about a reconfiguration of the public sphere, the 'global associational revolution' (Annan, 1998: 2) has literally reshaped the frame of reference of UN thinking. In particular, the UN appears much more attentive than before to the claims of transnational movements that promote 'a more inclusive and democratic vision of global governance' (Smith, 2008: 92). At the same time, breaking with its traditional hostility toward the business sector, the

UN now believes that corporations and financial institutions 'must be more closely associated with international decisions' (Boutros-Ghali, 1995a). This new openness was particularly well received by the business community, and Kofi Annan frequently noted that the private sector showed a 'significant increase in interest' with regard to UN activities (2002b: 25).

According to the UN, the end of the 20th century was marked by profound structural changes in world affairs. Although quite diverse in nature and scope, these changes pointed toward the same political conclusion, that is, an urgent need to expand the democratic order.

Searching for Greater Democratic Legitimacy

The UN also regards the objective of global democracy as a response to an important normative transformation: the emergence of democracy as a legitimizing principle of global governance. Boutros-Ghali candidly acknowledged this evolution of world politics when he stated in the mid-1990s, 'A few short years ago, no one ever spoke of making the United Nations system more democratic. Today, the question is on every agenda' (1995a). This analysis was corroborated when the democratization of the UN was officially declared 'the central and overarching objective' of the 2008 session of the General Assembly (UN News Service, 2008).

When it began looking at democracy from a transnational perspective in the early 1990s, the UN was reflecting the nascent debate on the 'democratic deficit' of global governance. This entire debate was permeated with the idea that 'everywhere, the exercise of power requires the consent of those that are governed' (Dervis and Özer, 2005: 4). Despite the pompous opening words — 'We the peoples' — of the UN Charter Preamble, international organizations in general and the UN in particular traditionally saw themselves as forums 'for sovereign states alone' (Boutros-Ghali, 1996c: 7). Yet in recent years, the legitimacy of international governance founded on sovereignty has been increasingly challenged by the rise of a new, democratic norm. This change has had a decisive impact on UN ideology and practices.

Admitting that states 'cannot do the job alone' (Annan, 2005: 6), Kofi Annan endorsed the principle of democratic legitimacy by declaring that 'our touchstone more than ever must be the will of the people' (2002a: 141). These ideas were articulated at length in the report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations that Annan solicited from former Brazilian president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Released in 2004, the Cardoso Report strongly supported the view that 'today's challenges require the United Nations to be more than just an intergovernmental forum', and that the world body 'should accept a more explicit role in (...) tackling the democratic deficits it is prone to, emphasizing participatory democracy and deeper accountability of institutions to the global public' (Panel of Eminent Persons on

UN-Civil Society Relations, 2004: 8-9).

The broadening of public participation is considered by the UN as a unique means to boost the legitimacy of international cooperation. The organization therefore encourages the democratization of all its functions, from agenda-setting to the delivery of services. Above all, it stresses the general principle that '[t]he voice of the people must be heard at the United Nations' (Annan, 2003a). Defining itself as the world's primary deliberative forum, the UN maintains that it has the political responsibility of being accessible to all constituencies that represent citizens' interests. Public consultation is thus increasingly seen as a pre-condition for the formulation of good multilateral policies.

The UN furthermore believes that global democracy must be bolstered through greater citizens' involvement in the implementation of its decisions. The engagement of non-state actors seems especially desirable for 'managing the path of globalization' (Annan, 2000: 13). Since the late 1990s, major efforts have thus been devoted to the institutionalization of public participation through a host of operational partnerships. These partnerships are grounded in the conviction that, in order to be solved, current economic, social, and environmental problems need the active collaboration of all the parties involved. As Annan explained, '[t]he overriding purpose of cooperation between the United Nations and non-state actors' is 'to enable the Organization to serve Member States and their

peoples more effectively' (2001a: 42).

The global democracy model promoted by the UN reaches out to a wide variety of social groups. NGOs, which are seen as 'a powerful factor for democratization throughout the international system' (Boutros-Ghali, 1995b), are quite naturally at the heart of the UN project. While admitting that interaction between civil society and the UN must be reinforced, Kofi Annan underlined that NGOs already provide 'the kind of engagement the United Nations relies on to be as effective and responsive as it can be' (2002c). For decades, it has been argued that NGOs fulfill 'an essential representational role,' and that their participation in UN deliberations provides 'a guarantee of political legitimacy' for the world body (Boutros-Ghali, 1995a). More and more, it is recognized that NGOs also enhance the efficiency of UN activities by supplying 'field experience and expertise across a vast array of human concerns' (Boutros-Ghali, 1996a: 34).

Together with NGOs, elected representatives and the private sector are key players in the UN vision of a democratic global order. One significant asset of elected representatives is that they often take part in a variety of transgovernmental networks that broaden the traditional patterns of diplomacy (Slaughter, 2004). In addition, they have access to knowledge and resources that may help to bridge the gap between citizens and the UN, and to implement global policies. In summarizing the scope of these advantages, Boutros-Ghali

described parliamentarians as ‘an essential link to international public opinion’ (1996a: 36), while Kofi Annan, for his part, stressed that elected representatives are the ones who ‘translate ideas, ethics and policy orientations into legislation that helps shape a society and the way a country is governed’ (2003b). The UN pays particular attention to the democratizing potential of local representatives, since ‘[f]or most of the world’s population, it is their local authority that has the most direct influence on their lives’ (Annan, 2004: 5).

The mobilization of the private sector was presented by Boutros-Ghali as the ‘latest phase (...) in the task of ushering in a global democratic society’ (1996d). Kofi Annan reiterated on several occasions that private enterprise, including transnational corporations, occupies ‘a critical place in the constellation of actors who can contribute to democratic governance’ (2001b). His proclaimed objective was to ‘unite the powers of markets with the authority of universal ideals’.³ The UN, however, is well aware of the strong suspicions that such an objective provokes. Many scholars, for instance, have decried the growing participation of business, and suggested that the ‘blurring of the distinction between the public and private sectors can raise serious questions about the accountability and legitimacy of the international public policy processes’ (Porter, 2005: 223). Taking these concerns into account, Annan made clear that the expanding involvement of private firms in global governance implies a new balance between their rights and their responsibilities, a goal whose political dimension has been acknowledged through the concept of ‘global corporate

citizenship' (2000: 13).

The UN discourse has placed ever-greater emphasis on the need to democratize global governance. This objective, the UN argues, can only result from the more extensive engagement of non-state actors — especially NGOs and business — in international affairs. Critics have questioned the UN conception of global democracy, pointing out that non-state actors suffer from low levels of accountability and representativity (Wapner, 2002: 157; Edwards and Zadek, 2003: 209-210). A common fear is that the UN approach may lead to a form of globalization 'from the middle' (Sen, 2007: 62), rather than from below, as it tends to reduce democratization to participatory politics. Indeed, although UN officials have at times acknowledged that NGOs should improve their transparency or that business and the UN have distinct goals, the organization resolutely embraces inclusiveness as the primary principle on which a democratic world order should be built. The UN appears convinced that, in spite of all their weaknesses, non-state actors can enhance the legitimacy of the workings of global governance. Only time will tell if this vision is politically sustainable.

From the UN's point of view, promoting a democratic world order is perfectly in line with the organization's traditional values. Global democracy is directly linked to UN goals with respect to security and development, since '[w]ithout true democracy in international relations, peace will not endure, and a

satisfactory pace of development cannot be assured' (Boutros-Ghali, 1994: par. 133). More specifically, the connection between security and democracy is built on the conviction that the 'culture of democracy is fundamentally a culture of peace' (Boutros-Ghali, 1996a: 7), while the interaction between development and democracy stems from the belief that '[d]emocratization within the international system permits voices for development not only to be heard but also to carry political weight' (Boutros-Ghali, 1994: par. 137). The idea of global democracy also complements the UN's work in the area of human rights, inasmuch as 'democratization at the international level is based on and aims to promote the dignity and worth of the individual human being and the fundamental equality of all persons and of all peoples' (Boutros-Ghali, 1996a: 27). In the final analysis, global democracy can be described as the most recent UN utopia. This project, however, coheres both conceptually and politically with basic UN objectives.

UN Policies in Favour of Global Democracy

Informed by the values of global democracy, UN policies are intended to further the engagement of non-state actors through a series of new mechanisms and institutions. Dialogue and collaboration with a wide range of groups are encouraged so as to strengthen the legitimacy of inputs and outputs of the UN system. This political process can best be analyzed through UN deliberations and the partnerships that the organization sponsors. As demonstrated below, deliberations and partnerships provide a unique perspective into, respectively, the input- and output-oriented legitimacy that the UN strives to increase.

Democracy Through Deliberations

While its progress since the end of the Cold War has been unparalleled, the notion of global democracy is solidly rooted in the history of UN internal practices. From its early days, the organization has sought to strengthen its legitimacy by allowing non-state actors to express their values and interests. Since 1945, ECOSOC has consulted with NGOs under the provisions of article 71 of the UN Charter, and this mechanism has allowed NGOs to make 'significant contributions to international policymaking' (Wapner, 2007: 258). In the 1970s, the conferences organized by ECOSOC broadened the dialogue between the UN and civil society, a process that led to the UN Secretariat's establishing the Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) in 1975 (Alger, 2007: 705). At the General Assembly, the Secretary-General has always had the power to invite NGOs to take part in meetings on economic and social issues (Willetts, 2000: 196). As for the Security Council, there has been an *ad hoc* procedure since 1982 that allows experts to be convened to provide information to member-states. In short, there exists a long tradition of cooperation between the UN and civil society. It was the world conferences of the 1990s, however, that allowed this cooperation to 'really blossom' (Annan, 2002b: 24).

Boutros-Ghali stressed that the major conferences of the 1990s contributed significantly to 'the reinforcement of democratic principles in world affairs' (1995b). Sharing his predecessor's interpretation, Kofi Annan added that

'today it would be unthinkable to stage such events without the policy perspectives, unique advocacy and mobilization of civil society' (2006: 42). Both assessments were based on a shared belief that by enlarging the scale and impact of public participation, the conferences of the 1990s played 'an important role' in the recent evolution of global governance (Schechter, 2005: 2).

The growing extent of civil society involvement can be explained first by the streamlining of accreditation procedures (Willetts, 2000: 193-94). By way of comparison, 1100 NGOs took part in the 1992 Rio Conference on the Environment and Development, while only 134 had attended the Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 (Schechter, 2005: 119). Moreover, the role of civil society, which was initially restricted to plenary sessions, was enlarged over time to include various committees and working groups (Willetts, 2000: 194). Finally, the public today is represented by a greater diversity of groups. After the NGOs' initial breakthrough, the private sector, parliamentarians, and local authorities have gradually played a more significant part in recent UN-sponsored conferences.

The impact of civil society in global conferences has also grown in comparison with the situation of the 1970s, when states had complete control over the organization of the meetings. In the first place, NGOs have gained influence in framing the issues under discussion, and strong lobbying has led to 'the appearance of NGOs' ideas in governmental negotiating texts' (Emmerij et

al., 2001: 117). Public pressures were particularly effective at conferences dealing with the environment (1992), women (1995), and social development (1995). Second, civil society's growing impact is linked to its extensive involvement in the follow-up process of the meetings. According to Michael Schechter, 'NGOs have been increasingly successful in having themselves empowered for effectuating the conferences' outcomes, be they formal treaties or programmes of action' (2001: 191). Civil society was assigned particularly broad responsibilities in *Agenda 21*, the final document of the Rio Conference, and in the action plan adopted at the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women (Emmerij et al., 2001: 93, 106).

Following its achievements in domestic politics, the women's movement has provided the strongest evidence of civil society's prominent role in shaping global debates through UN conferences (Schechter, 2005). Thanks to sophisticated lobbying and networking strategies, the influence of women's activism was felt well beyond the Beijing Conference. In the months leading up to the Rio Conference, for instance, the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) formulated recommendations to 'reflect women's views' (Chen, 1996: 144). As a result, the final version of Agenda 21 took women's concerns into account, 'most notably in paragraphs that recognised women as actors and participants in the move towards more sustainable development' (Chen, 1996: 144). At the Vienna Conference on Human Rights (1993), women's groups mobilized to frame women's rights as human rights, and

succeeded in getting ‘whole paragraphs on women’s rights and violence against women into the final document’ (Clark et al., 1998: 31). Similarly, at the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994), the women’s movement helped to initiate a paradigm shift from population control — which had been the core principle of global population policy for thirty years — to a ‘new norm’ of reproductive rights and health (Eager, 2004: 146). Not surprisingly, the pressure exerted by women culminated with the 1995 Beijing Conference. According to one estimate, ‘67 percent of NGO recommendations on controversial text’ were incorporated in the Beijing final document (Clark et al., 1998: 31).

Aside from global conferences, the involvement of non-state actors has taken on a new dimension at the UN General Assembly. One major innovation has been the holding since 2005 of informal interactive hearings at special sessions of the General Assembly. These hearings have given civil society groups the opportunity to make recommendations on a wide range of topics. The first interactive hearings were organized in preparation for the 2005 World Summit, in order to gather civil society’s views on the Secretary-General’s report, *In Larger Freedom*, and on the Summit’s *Draft Outcome Document*.⁴ Recent hearings of the General Assembly have centered on development, climate change, AIDS, migrations, and inter-religious cooperation. Discussions have been held to make the *ad hoc* experience of the informal interactive hearings a permanent consultative mechanism (Annan, 2004: 4).

At the same time, it is important to note that, despite UN official support, member-states have consistently opposed the NGOs' request to take part in the General Assembly's regular work (Annan, 2004: 7). To date, only the International Committee of the Red Cross has obtained full observer status within that body (Willetts, 2000: 197). In light of this, it is remarkable that NGOs have been able to wield their influence nevertheless. The resolutions on landmines adopted in 1995 and those on the arms trade, adopted in 2006, are often held up as forceful illustrations of NGOs' impact on General Assembly negotiations. Interestingly, the General Assembly has shown more openness towards parliamentarians than towards civil society groups. After the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) was granted observer status in 2002, audiences with parliamentarians have been included in regular annual sessions of the General Assembly since 2007. The fact that parliamentarians are elected certainly goes a long way to explain the ongoing collaboration between them and the General Assembly. However, this collaboration has apparently not been sufficient for parliamentarians to make a significant impact on global affairs (Scholte, 2006: 64).

At the Security Council, the involvement of civil society has also gone through major changes in the past few years. Since 1992, the participation of non-state actors has been reinforced thanks to the Arria formula, a mechanism resulting from an initiative taken by Venezuela's former ambassador, Diego Arria (Luck, 2006: 77). The Arria formula makes it possible to hold informal meetings

of the Security Council so that non-official voices can be heard. The convening of such meetings has now become a regular procedure (Annan, 2004: 4). The consultations conducted within the framework of the Arria formula have dealt with either specific conflict situations such as those in Haiti, Darfur, and the Congo Democratic Republic, or with broader security issues such as child-soldiers, and women and peace.⁵ Furthermore, since 1995, an NGO Working Group promotes off-the-record dialogue with the Security Council by organizing briefings for delegates. Bringing together thirty high-profile NGOs — including OXFAM, MSF (Doctors Without Borders), Amnesty International, and CARE — under the leadership of the Global Policy Forum, the group strives to heighten the Council members' awareness of issues related to human rights, humanitarian aid, disarmament, and the environment (Luck, 2006: 77).⁶

The influence of civil society on Security Council deliberations has taken various forms. NGOs have at times managed to introduce issues on the Council agenda and to orient decision-making. One much-publicized case occurred at the end of the 1990s, when the Global Witness campaign drew the attention of the international community and the Council to the role of 'conflict diamonds' in African civil wars (Paul, 2004). The campaign eventually led to the imposition of trade sanctions against Angola, Liberia, and Sierra Leone (Luck, 2006: 61). In addition to this telling example, the establishment of criminal tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda, as well as the adoption of resolutions on the illicit arms flow in Africa and the protection of civilians — women, in particular — in armed

conflicts, also bear the mark of NGOs. More generally, Council members rely to a growing extent on the expertise of NGOs in their daily work. This is especially true of non-permanent members, whose resources are limited and who by and large do not have access to information networks comparable to those of established organizations such as MSF, ICG (International Crisis Group), or Human Rights Watch (Paul, 2004). As the ultimate bastion of power politics, the Security Council is certainly less affected than other components of the UN system by civil society participation. However, the very fact that NGOs have succeeded in loosening the grip that states have on the institution points to their growing political strength in world politics.

Non-state actors are making their voices heard more than ever in UN deliberations. In world conferences, the General Assembly, and the Security Council, a host of new rules has been established to encourage their engagement and to bolster the organization's legitimacy. Granted, the scope of these changes should not be exaggerated. After all, there are no metrics available to quantify the difference that public participation has made in global policy-making. Yet, in spite of their limitations, it seems fair to say that the new UN practices have sparked a groundbreaking transformation of the Westphalian order, and contributed to the advancement of the idea of global democracy.

Global Democracy Through Partnerships

Concerned from the beginning with its output-based legitimacy — which is a function of efficiency in solving problems and in increasing welfare — the UN has always collaborated with non-state actors in its work on the ground. From the moment of their creation, many UN agencies and programs relied on civil society to ensure the success of their operations. UNESCO and the WHO have maintained a longstanding cooperation with NGOs, one that goes well beyond the provisions of Article 71 of the Charter (Anand, 1999: 70; see also Wapner, 2007: 260). And, although fewer in number, the first partnerships with the private sector were established decades ago. In the 1960s, for example, the ‘Freedom from Hunger’ campaign initiated by the FAO and civil society was extended to transnational corporations of the food industry (Weitz, 1999: 82-83). Thus, there is a long history of partnerships between the UN and non-state actors.

Partnerships have been defined by UN leaders as ‘voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties, both State and non-State, in which participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task’ (Annan, 2003c: 4). These arrangements are specifically geared to implementation and results, and have typically involved a sharing of ‘risks, responsibilities, resources, competencies and benefits’ (Annan, 2003c: 4). While often presented as an innovative response to the interdependence and complexity of international challenges, partnerships have nevertheless triggered intense political debates. For some experts, a ‘clear

causal link' can rarely be established between the actions of a partnership and the solution to a specific problem (Witte and Reinicke, 2005: 47). Others emphasize that public participation in partnerships is highly selective. Not only is the expanding role of the private sector repeatedly criticized, but there is a growing body of evidence indicating that all interested stakeholders — particularly those from the South — 'do not make it to the bargaining table' (Hirschland, 2006: 149). Thus, the jury is still out on the exact contribution of UN-sponsored partnerships to global governance. There is no denying, however, that the number and scope of these cooperative initiatives have reached unprecedented levels over the last decade.

The ideology of global democracy has acted as a catalyst for the recent transformation of the UN approach towards partnerships and paved the way for two major changes: the significant increase in the number of local partnerships and the emergence of new, global partnerships. Whereas local partnerships are decentralized and pursue fairly specific objectives, global partnerships are more centralized and foster a holistic approach bearing on several issues (Annan, 2003c: 4-5). Even though, in reality, UN partnerships correspond to a range of scenarios rather than a binary division, the distinction between 'local' and 'global' partnerships is useful because it permits us to identify two archetypes of public policy. In what follows, we outline the changes that have occurred in local partnerships and then discuss in a greater detail the rise of global partnerships.

Notwithstanding the skepticism of certain observers, partnerships stand out as one of the UN's main tools for the promotion of global democracy. Over the last decade, as suggested earlier, UN programs and agencies have developed closer ties with civil society in the follow-up process of the world conferences. As a result, local partnerships flourished, particularly in the areas of development and the environment. Aside from the increased number of such initiatives, two important qualitative changes were also introduced. First, NGOs have become involved in the actual development of partnerships. As Kofi Annan explained, '[o]ver the last few years, [NGO] involvement has increased and moved 'upstream' as NGOs participate more and more commonly in the design of projects' (1998: 10). Second, in accordance with the policy of rapprochement between the UN and business, private sector participation in UN partnerships is more frequently solicited. In UNDP projects, for instance, NGOs and local companies are often called upon to work together (Nelson, 2002: 178-81; Murphy, 2006). While a complete operational assessment of local partnerships has yet to be done, UN authorities appear convinced that they provide an opportunity for organizational innovation and improve the delivery of services.

The UN has also demonstrated its capacity to adapt through the creation of global, 'strategic' partnerships. The adjective 'strategic' is particularly apt for describing the most recent global partnerships such as the Millennium Development Goals and the Global Compact, two policy frameworks that encompass numerous stakeholders and cover a particularly wide range of

issues. The establishment of strategic partnerships results from a gradual process that originated in the early 1990s. This process has been closely linked to the success of multilateral experiments, including the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), and UNAIDS. These three inter-agency institutions, each of which is focused on a global theme, played a path-breaking role in the emergence of UN global partnerships and in the advancement towards a more participatory international system.

The GEF was created in 1991 by the World Bank, the UNDP, and UNEP for the purpose of assisting bilateral donors and NGOs in the funding of environmental projects 'that would have global benefits' (Soroos, 2005: 36). Inaugurated in 1993 in the wake of the Rio Conference, the CSD, for its part, is a forum in which governments, international organizations, and hundreds of civil society groups collaborate in projects aiming at the implementation of Earth Summit decisions. Lastly, UNAIDS was set up in 1996 in order to bring together the efforts and resources of civil society, the World Bank, and ten UN agencies involved in the global fight against the AIDS epidemic. Partnerships such as the GEF, the CSD, and UNAIDS helped establish global public policy networks, and gradually gained ascendancy as models to be emulated and developed. Compared to local partnerships, the added value of such global programs relied on three factors. First, they have had a bigger impact on the ground because of their much greater human and financial resources. Second, they have helped

make the most of the UN's comparative advantages, such as 'its convening power, neutrality, integrity, issues leadership, expertise and ability to motivate non-State actors' (Annan, 2003c: 16). Finally, being inherently inter-agency, global initiatives have provided 'a more coherent and systematic approach' (Annan, 2003c: 20) to the promotion of partnerships through the UN system.

At the turn of the millennium, global partnerships would become even more ambitious and 'strategic'. Two such strategic global partnerships, both of which fulfill important networking functions, currently dominate the UN agenda: the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Global Compact. The MDGs, adopted by 189 governments at the Millennium Summit of 2000, have focused more global attention than ever before on poverty-reduction and development issues. While states retain the prime responsibility for meeting the MDGs, it has been widely recognized that mobilizing non-state actors is key for their achievement. Indeed, the MDG framework established a 'clear mandate to develop partnerships with the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and civil society in general' (Annan, 2001a: 42).

Civil society groups contribute to the fulfillment of the MDGs through activities related to advocacy, policy-design, implementation, and monitoring. Advocacy of the MDGs has been channelled primarily through the Millennium Campaign, launched in 2002. As the Executive Coordinator of the campaign, Eveline Herfkens, recalled, this 'was the first time ever the UN initiated an effort

to build awareness of internationally agreed objectives and to inspire and mobilize citizens to hold their governments accountable for their achievement'.⁷ The Millennium Campaign organized various public demonstrations such as the 'Stand Up Against Poverty' event in October 2007, and facilitated civil society networking through the Global Coalition Against Poverty. With respect to policy-design, the potential contribution of non-state actors was acknowledged early on with the establishment of the Millennium Project, headed by US economist Jeffrey Sachs. From 2002 to 2005, the Millennium Project assembled 250 governmental and non-governmental experts whose task was to 'develop a concrete action plan for the world to achieve the MDGs'.⁸ At the country level, NGOs have also advocated for the inclusion of policies in favour of the poor in national poverty reduction programs.

Implementation of the MDGs has benefited from the widely recognized capacity of international and local NGOs to provide basic services to vulnerable groups. Between 2000 and 2006, it should be noted, NGOs considerably raised their profile in the aid regime, as their grants to developing countries rose from \$6.9 billion to \$14.7 billion. The MDG framework notably served as a platform to launch new civil society initiatives such as Millennium Villages, a program covering 80 sub-Saharan villages and designed to address 'simultaneously' problems like 'hunger, disease, inadequate education, lack of safe drinking water, and absence of essential infrastructure'.⁹ Finally, civil society has been involved in monitoring the achievement of MDGs in a variety of ways. At the

global level, the MDG Network has offered NGOs a virtual space to discuss progress towards the MDGs with other stakeholders. At the regional and national levels, NGOs have provided analytical tools to review the implementation of the goals. In Latin America, for instance, women's groups have developed quantitative indicators to measure states' compliance with women-related MDGs, while in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, NGOs have published 'citizens' reports' on the MDGs (Millennium Project, 2005: 132).¹⁰ In sum, the MDG framework is more than a mere intergovernmental program. As the engine of numerous partnerships embracing diverse constituencies and interconnected issues, it has assigned to non-state actors a significantly larger role in the governance of global development.

Launched only a few months before the adoption of the MDGs, the Global Compact represents another strategic partnership crucial to the UN vision of global democracy. The Compact is a corporate citizenship initiative that invites the private sector to support major international agreements in four areas: human rights, labour standards, the environment, and the fight against corruption. It has now become a key instrument in the UN's overall strategy to foster a more inclusive world economy. Along with its 2500 corporate members and the UN Secretariat, the Compact encompasses six UN specialized agencies as well as a number of NGOs, labour associations, think tanks, and government representatives. Through the action program that it spearheads, the Compact strives to promote dialogue on corporate social responsibility and development,

and to foster new forms of cooperation among member stakeholders. The democratizing power of the Global Compact has been effectively substantiated through its ability to generate unprecedented debates among business, labour, civil society, and governments. The Compact is often portrayed as ‘the most vivid example of public-private partnerships initiated by the UN over the past few years’ (Thérien and Pouliot, 2006: 57).

The notion of partnership is anchored in both the Global Compact's structure and policy initiatives. In terms of structure, the Compact is characterized by a governance system in which state and non-state actors collaborate. An innovative feature of this governance system is the Global Compact Leaders Summit, whose 2007 edition constituted ‘history’s largest and most significant event on the topic of leadership and corporate citizenship’.¹¹ As this summit demonstrated, the Global Compact provides a forum for discussing economic, political, and social issues in a manner that goes beyond traditional multilateralism.

The Global Compact has also been a catalyst for specific initiatives intended to deliver ‘economic and social benefits to people, communities and markets everywhere’.¹² Prime initiatives include the Caring for Climate action platform and the CEO Water Mandate. A result of a consultation involving UNEP as well as business and civil society representatives, the Caring for Climate program commits its signatories ‘to reduce the carbon burden of [their] products,

services and processes'.¹³ In 2008, the initiative was endorsed by over 200 companies. For its part, the CEO Water Mandate proposes to develop 'strategies and solutions to contribute positively to the emerging global water crisis'.¹⁴ Its inauguration in 2008 was attended by a wide range of stakeholders, including Nestle, Coca-Cola, the WWF, Plan Malawi, Nature Conservancy, and several UN agencies. As long as the Global Compact continues to rely on voluntary norms, its potential to transform the world economy will of course remain low. Yet, through the Caring for Climate program and the CEO Water Mandate, the Global Compact offers a powerful illustration of how international cooperation can be opened up to non-state actors.

As they have multiplied, UN-sponsored partnerships have been exposed to various types of criticism. The fiercest accusations have associated partnerships with a privatization and a commercialization of world politics, both at odds with democratic values and principles. While these criticisms have some legitimacy, they must be put into perspective. UN partnerships cannot be judged solely in relation to an ideal; they must also be assessed within the environment of real world politics, which remains rife with inequalities and power relationships. UN partnerships may not signal the start of a world democratic revolution, but in their own modest way they help close significant implementation gaps and broaden the 'global public domain' (Ruggie, 2004).

Conclusion

Today, democracy is not the strictly national issue that it was for so long. International organizations have played a major role in effecting this change, a role none had anticipated when they first appeared on the political scene in the 19th century. On the one hand, as Robert Keohane, Stephen Macedo, and Andrew Moravcsik have argued, 'multilateral institutions can enhance constitutional democracy' (2009: 26). On the other hand, as our study suggests, international organizations can also promote democracy beyond the nation-state. In other words, the so-called 'multilateralism versus democracy' debate (Keohane et al., 2009: 4) can be challenged from two very distinct perspectives.

This article has shown that the discourse and policies of the United Nations take the idea of global democracy seriously. At the rhetorical level, UN leaders repeatedly emphasize that the globalization of democracy is a trend consistent with recent structural changes in the world order. While viewing democracy as a universal right and a source of legitimacy that rivals sovereignty, the UN also stresses the need for a stronger engagement of civil society, business, and other global constituencies in world affairs. At the policy level, our analysis has explained how the UN seeks to put the ideology of global democracy into practice through more effective public participation. Non-state actors have been allowed to take an increasing part in UN deliberations and consequently have succeeded in adding input-based legitimacy to multilateral decision-making. Furthermore, because they are involved in a growing number of UN-sponsored operational partnerships, non-state actors have also been able

to strengthen the output-based legitimacy of the world body. Overall, in demonstrating that the UN has a direct influence on the global political culture, both through its discourse and deeds, our study provides additional empirical material to support the argument that the organization is a meaningful intellectual actor.

Of course, the advancement of global democracy should be examined with a critical eye. Important counter-trends and obstacles must be taken into account to assess the real progress of this political project. First, democratic norms remain weak in many parts of the world. It is doubtful that governments unreceptive to public debate and participation at home would adopt such values at the global level. Second, UN discourse and policies related to the promotion of global democracy are circumscribed by the limitations of the UN Charter, which is founded on very traditional power structures. With its veto rule, the Security Council is the archetype of un-democratic politics. Moreover, the idea that 'the United Nations is and will remain an intergovernmental organization' (Annan, 2006: 91) has rarely been challenged from within the institution. Third increasing participation of non-state actors in global governance — which is at the core of the UN democratic project — can be no more than a proxy for global democracy. While they like to define themselves by referring to the public good, NGOs as well as corporations always represent some special interests. In addition, poor people and poor nations have been largely left out of the

participatory mechanisms designed by the UN. For the time being, then, global democracy will continue to be a very distant prospect.

According to political philosopher Will Kymlicka, 'the only forum in which genuine democracy occurs is within national boundaries' (1999: 124). 'Genuine democracy', however, is a historical institution, and its defining features can best be seen as evolving through social interaction and conflict. The UN may never replace the town hall or the national parliament as a space for political debate. Still, in recent years, the organization has succeeded in promoting a deterritorialization of governance and in fostering a 'sense of transnational and possibly global solidarity' (Wapner, 2007: 255). In this respect, the UN has indisputably helped the idea of global democracy to more firmly take root in modern political life. Students of international relations should be careful not to minimize such an achievement.

Notes

¹ A complete list of the studies published by the UN Intellectual History Project is available at: www.unhistory.org.

² Similar resolutions were adopted in 2005 and 2007.

³ Kofi A. Annan, quoted in Global Compact Office, *The Global Compact: Corporate Citizens in the World Economy*, New York: United Nations, 2003, 1.

⁴ Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS), 'General Assembly/Civil Society Hearings', *Go Between* (107), 2005, 1-2.

⁵ Global Policy Forum, 'Arria and Other Special Meetings between NGOs and Security Council Members'. Available at: www.globalpolicy.org/security/mtgsetc/brieindx.htm.

⁶ See also Global Policy Forum, 'NGO Working Group on the Security Council'. Available at: www.globalpolicy.org/security/ngowkgrp/index.htm.

⁷ See Eveline Herfkens, 'Looking Back, Looking Forward: The Successes and Challenges of the Millennium Campaign'. Available at: www.endpoverty2015.org/node/139.

⁸ See 'UN Millennium Project'. Available at: www.unmillenniumproject.org.

⁹ See 'Millennium Villages Project: Working to End Hunger in Africa'. Available at: www.millenniumpromise.org.

¹⁰ See also 'The Importance of India Citizens' Report'. Available at: www.endpoverty2015.org/node/176.

¹¹ See Global Compact, '2007 Global Compact Leaders Summit Facing Realities: Getting Down to Business'. Available at: www.globalcompactsummit.org/index.shtml.

¹² See the 'Geneva Declaration' issued after the 2007 Global Compact Leaders Summit, 5-6 July 2007. Available at www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/summit2007/GENEVA_DECLARATION.pdf

¹³ See Global Compact, 'Caring for Climate: The Business Leadership Platform', Geneva, 2007. Available at [www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/issues_doc/Environment/CLIMATE STATEMENT.pdf](http://www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/issues_doc/Environment/CLIMATE_STATEMENT.pdf)

¹⁴ Global Compact, 'The CEO Water Mandate – An Initiative by Business Leaders in Partnership with the International Community', 2008. Available at: www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/news_events/8.1/Ceo_water_mandate.pdf.

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