

NGOs AND THE UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION: SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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What is an NGO?

A non-governmental organization (NGO) is any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to Governments, monitor policies and encourage political participation at the community level. They provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms and help monitor and implement international agreements. Some are organized around specific issues, such as human rights, the environment or health. Their relationship with offices and agencies of the United Nations System differs depending on their goals, their venue and their mandate.

Over 1,500 NGOs with strong information programmes on issues of concern to the United Nations are associated with the Department of Public Information (DPI), giving the United Nations valuable links to people around the world. DPI helps those NGOs gain access to and disseminate information about the range of issues in which the United Nations is involved, to enable the public to understand better the aims and objectives of the world Organization.

How do NGOs and DPI cooperate?

The Department of Public Information and NGOs cooperate regularly. NGOs associated with DPI disseminate information about the UN to their membership, thereby building knowledge of and support for the Organization at the grassroots level. This dissemination includes:

Publicizing UN activities around the world on such issues as peace and security, economic and social development, human rights, humanitarian affairs and international law;
Promoting UN observances and international years established by the General Assembly to focus world attention on important issues facing humanity.

When did the DPI relationship with NGOs begin?

The importance of working with and through NGOs as an integral part of United Nations information activities was recognized when the Department of Public Information was first established in 1946. The General Assembly, in its resolution 13 (I), instructed DPI and its branch offices to:

"...actively assist and encourage national information services, educational institutions and other governmental and non-governmental organizations of all kinds interested in spreading information

about the United Nations. For this and other purposes, it should operate a fully equipped reference service, brief or supply lecturers, and make available its publications, documentary films, film strips, posters and other exhibits for use by these agencies and organizations."

In 1968, the Economic and Social Council, by Resolution 1297 (XLIV) of 27 May, called on DPI to associate NGOs, bearing in mind the letter and spirit of its Resolution 1296 (XLIV) of 23 May 1968, which stated that an NGO "...shall undertake to support the work of the United Nations and to promote knowledge of its principles and activities, in accordance with its own aims and purposes and the nature and scope of its competence and activities".

"What are the Criteria for NGOs to become associated with DPI?"

Organizations eligible for association with DPI are those which:

- Share the ideals of the UN Charter;
- Operate solely on a not-for-profit basis;
- Have a demonstrated interest in United Nations issues and proven ability to reach large or specialized audiences, such as educators, media representatives, policy makers and the business community;
- Have the commitment and means to conduct effective information programmes about UN activities by publishing newsletters, bulletins, and pamphlets; organizing conferences, seminars and round tables; and enlisting the cooperation of the media.

"What is the procedure for NGOs to become associated with DPI"?

An NGO that meets the established criteria should send an official letter from its headquarters to the Chief of the NGO Section, Department of Public Information, expressing interest in association with DPI. The letter should state the reasons why the organization seeks such association and should briefly describe its information programmes. This letter should be accompanied by at least six samples of recent information materials produced by the applying organization. Letters of reference from UN Departments, UN Programmes and Specialized Agencies, and/or UN Information Centres and Services (UNICs and UNISs) will greatly enhance consideration of the application.

Correspondence should be sent to:

Chief, NGO Section
Department of Public Information
Room S-1070L
United Nations, New York, N.Y. 10017
tel: (212) 963-6842
fax: (212) 963-6914/2819

Once the application process is completed, the DPI Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations will review applications at its scheduled sessions. Applicants are notified immediately of the results of the Committee's deliberations. Associated NGOs are then invited to designate their main and alternate representatives to the Department of Public Information.

Please note: Association of NGOs with DPI does not constitute their incorporation into the United Nations system, nor does it entitle associated organizations or their staff to any kind of privileges, immunities or special status.

"What is consultative status with the Economic and Social Council?"

Many NGOs active in the field of economic and social development have qualified for consultative status with the Economic and Social Council.

Article 71 of the Charter provides that "...the Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultations with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence". Such arrangements are governed by ECOSOC resolution 1296 (XLIV) of 23 May 1968, which makes provision for NGOs to be placed in consultative status with ECOSOC, as well as for them to hold consultations with its secretariat.

More recently, after three years of negotiation, ECOSOC reviewed its arrangements for consultation with NGOs in July 1996. One outcome was ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31, which revised the arrangements for NGO consultation with ECOSOC. It standardized arrangements for accrediting NGOs for UN conferences, streamlined the process of applying for ECOSOC consultative status, and decided that national NGOs would be eligible to apply. "General status" is granted to large, international NGOs that work on almost all the issues on ECOSOC's agenda; "special consultative status" is granted to NGOs that have competence in a few of ECOSOC's issue areas; while "roster status" is granted to NGOs which ECOSOC considers can make occasional useful contributions to its work.

A second outcome of the July 1996 ECOSOC review was ECOSOC Decision 1996/297, which recommended that the General Assembly examine, at its 51st session, the question of the participation of NGOs in all areas of work of the UN, in light of the experience gained through the consultative arrangement between NGOs and ECOSOC. Subsequently, in the General Assembly Working Group looking into the strengthening of the UN System, a sub-group on NGOs was formed. This sub-group is examining issues of NGO access, particularly with regard to the General Assembly, and its work is on-going.

ECOSOC decides on consultative status for NGOs based upon the recommendation of the inter-governmental Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations. This Committee is composed of nineteen Member States and meets yearly. For further information contact:

Non-Governmental Organizations Unit
Division for Policy Coordination and ECOSOC Affairs, DPCSD
Room DC1-1070
United Nations
New York, NY 10017

CONGO, the Conference on Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council, serves as a representative voice of NGOs in consultative status before ECOSOC. Its aims are to ensure that they enjoy the fullest opportunities and appropriate facilities for performing their consultative functions, to provide a forum on the consultative process, and to convene meetings of member organizations to exchange views on matters of common interest.

NGOs which enjoy consultative status with ECOSOC with strong public information programmes are granted association with DPI upon written request to the DPI/NGO Section.

"Do DPI NGOs have a representative mechanism?"

Yes. An 18-member DPI/NGO Executive Committee is elected by the DPI/NGO community to act in an advisory and liaison capacity to channel information and to represent the interests of NGOs associated with DPI. This Committee is made up of NGOs from different parts of the world whose representatives in New York are elected for a period of two years. The Executive Committee collaborates with the DPI/NGO Section on events, programmes and initiatives of mutual interest, including organization of the Annual DPI/NGO Conference.

The DPI/NGO Executive Committee is not part of the Department of Public Information. NGOs' association with DPI is independent of their relationship with the Executive Committee. DPI-associated NGOs are encouraged to maintain regular contact with the DPI/NGO Section.

"How does DPI assist NGOs?"

The DPI/NGO Section at United Nations Headquarters provides a number of services to its associated organizations. For example, the Section:

- Organizes and coordinates, in collaboration with the DPI/NGO Executive Committee, the Annual DPI Conference for Non-Governmental Organizations. This international forum brings together senior UN System officials, prominent international NGOs, academicians, public opinion makers and international media to discuss issues of global concern;
- Organizes weekly briefings for the NGO community at the UN on a range of global issues. The speakers for these briefings are senior United Nations System officials, Member State delegates and NGOs with expertise on the particular issue addressed at the briefing;
- Provides ground passes which grant a main and an alternate NGO representative access to all "open" meetings of UN bodies; to DPI photo, film and audio libraries; to the Dag Hammarskjöld Library; and, as observers, to the meetings of some 22 NGO committees organized by the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status with ECOSOC (CONGO);
- Coordinates joint DPI/NGO information programmes;
- Conducts a yearly orientation course for newly accredited NGO representatives;
- Publishes the DPI/NGO Annual Directory, which lists all associated NGOs alphabetically, by region and by subject of specialization;
- Maintains the NGO Resource Centre, which offers:
 - access to current UN documents and press releases;
 - regular mailings of UN information materials sent to the Headquarters of all associated NGOs;
 - a video lending library with an extensive collection of UN films; and
 - a continuously updated selection of United Nations System publications.

To contact the DPI/NGO Resource Center:
Room L-1B-31
United Nations, New York, N.Y. 10017
Phone: (212) 963-7233
Fax: (212) 963-2819

An excellent source of information on DPI/NGO activities is the United Nations' World Wide Web site. The address is <http://www.un.org>. DPI/NGO information is found in the icon "general information".

In addition to collaboration with DPI at Headquarters, the NGO community is encouraged to maintain regular and close contact with the United Nations Information Centres (UNICs) and United Nations Information Services (UNISs) worldwide to access United Nations information and organize joint projects.

"What are the responsibilities of NGOs associated with DPI?"

Since the founding days of the United Nations in San Francisco, NGOs have made valuable contributions to the international community by drawing attention to issues, suggesting ideas and programmes, disseminating information and mobilizing public opinion in support of the UN and its Specialized Agencies. Association with DPI constitutes a commitment to that effect. Associated NGOs are expected to devote a portion of their information programmes to promoting knowledge of the United Nations' principles and activities. In addition, they are expected to keep the DPI/NGO Section abreast of their activities by regularly providing samples of their information materials relating to the work of the UN. These are also made available for perusal at the DPI/NGO Resource Centre.

Recognizing non-governmental organizations as important actors in the international arena as we enter the 21st Century, Secretary-General Kofi Annan remarked "...we must forge a fundamentally new partnership with civil society. We must reach for a new synthesis between private initiative and the public good, which encourages entrepreneurship and market approaches together with social and environmental responsibility." (Message to the South-South Conference, San Jose, Costa Rica, January 1997).

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