

**Statement of the President of the Economic and Social Council, Gert Rosenthal, at the Capacity Building Workshop, United Nations Informal Regional Network (UN-NGO-IRENE) in Eastern Europe (Bucharest, Romania, May 29, 2003)**

**Mr. President,  
Co-sponsors of this event,  
Dear NGO Representatives and Colleagues:**

Let me begin by saying how pleased I am to be here, and to thank our hosts of the UN Secretariat, the UNDP and the Black Sea University Foundation for their kind invitation. As part of my duties as President of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, one of my functions is to reach out to the Non-Governmental Organizations, and most especially to those based outside of New York, with whom I naturally have the least opportunity to interact. On the more personal side, this has been a good opportunity to visit old and new friends, including my ex-colleague Alexandru A. Niculescu, who left his mark on the economic and social sectors of the United Nations during his tenure in New York.

In the second place, I would like to tell you a bit about the Economic and Social Council, since presumably not everyone in this room is familiar with our work. I have the honour to represent one of the three main inter-governmental organs based in New York; the General Assembly and the Security Council are, of course, the other two. It will come as no surprise to anyone that the functions established in the Charter for the Council gravitate around the examination of economic and social issues, much as the Security Council deals with peace and security. ECOSOC is made up of 54 member states, elected for three-year terms by the General Assembly. It discharges analytical, normative and advocacy roles, related to human rights and to economic and social affairs, and it is charged with coordinating, oversight and monitoring functions within the United Nations system. ECOSOC has numerous subsidiary bodies, most of which specialize in specific topics, such as statistics, social development, sustainable development, advancement of women, population and others. The five regional commissions of the United Nations also fall under our purview, so we are totally familiar with the regional dimension of the System. An especially relevant feature of the Council for today's gathering is that it is the portal of entry to the UN System for the non-governmental organizations and the business sector.

This regional workshop, which brings together representatives of non-governmental organizations from the states of central Europe, is, among other aspects, an effort to promote more structured cooperation and to ensure better access to the policy process at all levels. This has intrinsic value for your region, but it also feeds into the ECOSOC's broader goals of interacting with as broad a spectrum as possible of civil society.

In the third place, I would like to highlight how important the just-mentioned interaction has been for the United Nations. In spite of the fact that Article 71 of the UN Charter expressly authorizes ECOSOC to relate with non-governmental organizations, this authorization was not always acted on with enthusiasm. At first, many delegations held that non-governmental actors, and civil society, in general, should act through their respective Governments, rather than to seek a presence in the forums of the UN, which, after all, is an organization made up of sovereign states. But this feeling has long since given way to recognition of the value of interacting with NGOs: both those that engage in operational activities and those that assume an advocacy or normative role. The presence of numerous organizations in our issues-oriented discussions greatly enrich our own debate, and also serve to disseminate the United Nations' orientations and proposals.

For this reason, the number of NGOs with ECOSOC consultative status has grown exponentially in recent years. That growth reflects the very rapid expansion of non-governmental organizations at the local, national, regional and international levels, spurred both by domestic factors and an international environment increasingly friendly to NGO involvement in the development process.

This expansion has also taken place alongside renewed emphasis on the importance of good governance. In many cases, it is argued that governance will be improved if civil society and non-governmental groups actively participate in the decision-making process, since they are often much closer to the problems being experienced by local communities. At the national level, citizens are increasingly exercising direct influence over and interacting with their elected officials through the non-governmental groups to which they belong.

Indeed, throughout the world – and the countries of Eastern Europe are no exception – NGOs are assuming leadership roles in identifying and taking positions on significant policy issues, setting new directions for their own organizations and joining in the formation of networks and coalitions in support of joint action, advocacy and development strategies on critical local, national and international issues.

It is therefore natural that the involvement of NGO's has become an established fact of life in the United Nations. Major UN conferences and summits have been routinely attended by scores of NGOs and civil society groups from all over the globe. We have well-developed procedures and processes for interacting with non-governmental groups and ensuring their inputs into our deliberations. The same can be said for our ECOSOC gatherings.

In the fourth place, I would like to touch on the reason for promoting informal regional networks such as the one we are inaugurating today, and, in general, to contribute to the enhancement of NGOs participation in the United Nations' activities. Our basic premise is that the expanding role of NGOs in governance has implications for public debate and policy making in terms of their

legitimacy and accountability. NGOs bring with them new implications for democratic engagement. Instead of being based on election and representation, NGO legitimacy often rests on the credibility of their membership and effectiveness of their performance in relation to their stated goals. This is a new idea, which is still in the process of being tested.

In addition, within the NGO community, there are vast discrepancies of capacity, influence and perception, which often reflect the split between NGOs from developed and developing countries. The ability of the largest NGOs in developed countries to attract funding and support creates a clear structural imbalance in relation to NGOs from developing countries or the transitional countries which civil society groupings have not developed as rapidly. A similar cleavage is discerned between the major NGOs that have a permanent presence in New York, and the tens of thousands of NGOs around the world, based at the local or national level.

These structural imbalances also extend to inequalities in access to information and the ability to participate in international meetings. NGOs located in developed countries, for example, have easier access to information about the UN and other international bodies and greater ability to participate than do NGOs in developing or transitional countries. Access to information is improving rapidly through the Internet, but we have to continue to make special efforts to ensure that those who need it get the information required for effective participation.

Thus, helping to level the playing field for NGOs in the context of their contribution to the goals of the United Nations is what this type of workshop is all about. The Secretariat's efforts to build up informal regional networks is intended to help NGOs in this and other regions to build alliances and networks of cooperation that can minimize the financial and logistical constraints that limit the ability of NGOs to participate in decision-making processes at the global and national levels. Emphasis remains on the word "informal" because the responsibility primarily lies in your hands. The UN can only serve as a catalyst in this process.

The UN does, however, have a selfish interest in your success, for we are convinced that an organized, effective NGO Community can make an immense contribution to the work of the United Nations and to the achievement of the millennium development goals which the international community and the Secretary-General have made a central focus of our work. These goals cannot be achieved without the active involvement of groups such as those that you represent at this meeting; representative, action-oriented and locally based. That is why so much emphasis has been placed on building partnerships and networks among NGOs, governments and the international community as the best way forward.

To conclude, I would like to recall that in addressing the NGO Forum prior to the Millennium celebrations, Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted that:

**“By translating your concerns to collective action, you will be heard more loudly. By working through consensus rather than confrontation, you will be involved more closely. By forging alliances rather than competition you will pool your resources more effectively. By looking beyond special interests to the common interest and by making the connection between the local and the global, you will make a difference more widely.”**

**In echoing these thoughts, I want to encourage all of you to fully engage during this workshop. We can only achieve our economic and social goals if all those affected are included in the decision-making process. We no longer have the luxury of believing that the future welfare of our planet is solely the concern and responsibility of governments. To the contrary, we all share a collective responsibility for ensuring the prosperity and well-being of the present and future generations. Let us all respond to this challenge.**

**Thank you.**