

6 November 2000

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,  
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations  
in Consultative Status with the United Nations (CONGO)**

I am honored by this opportunity to address the tri-annual General Assembly of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the United Nations. The theme of your conference this time, "The United Nations/NGO Dynamics in the 21st Century: Together for Social Justice, Equality and Peace", is very fitting at the dawn of the new Millennium. We have an historic moment to build a new relationship between civil society and the United Nations.

I would like to share with you, some thoughts on the future dynamics of the relationship between the United Nations and civil society.

We have recently witnessed two events of major importance to our discussions today. At the Millennium Forum last May, over 1300 civil society organizations, with diverse backgrounds and from all over the world, were able to define and agree on common priorities. The Millennium Forum Declaration is the first official United Nations document produced exclusively by civil society. I congratulate the NGO-community for this achievement. It is a concrete illustration of positive results of co-operation reaching beyond geographical and issue-oriented barriers.

In September, the largest gathering ever of Heads of State and Government at the Millennium Summit agreed on a set of values, principles and goals for the entire international community in the early 21st century. The spirit of the Millennium Summit inspires and leads our work at the United Nations. Member States recognize the urgency and importance of translating these commitments into concrete action. I have taken steps to set in motion the follow-up process of the Summit.

The substantive goals and commitments of the Millennium Forum and the Millennium Summit are very much connected. This signifies that the activities of governments and civil society cannot be separated, but rather they should complement each other. Globalization itself entails that problems are more complex and interrelated and necessitate a comprehensive approach. On the other hand, globalization means that local action can make a difference also at the global level.

However, we should keep in mind that the Millennium Forum and the Millennium Summit were not the first occasions to deal with questions of peace and development. Both events were more like peak moments, where previous commitments and promises were reinforced. Also, the relationship between the United Nations and civil society started when the UN was established.

We have a long common history and now the new Millennium has intensified the need to strengthen this partnership.

One of my priorities as the President of the Millennium Assembly is to reach out to civil society at large in order to fully benefit from its expertise and to make the United Nations more relevant to the outside world. It is impossible to list all the areas where civil society has played a crucial role, but I would like to mention a few key sectors, such as promoting peace and human rights, enhancing development, fighting for democracy and speaking out for gender equality. All are areas of key concern to the United Nations and Member States.

The United Nations was established as an inter-governmental body to serve the peoples it represents. Now, we must broaden our constituency to achieve sustainable results. Only a few days ago, I proposed to Member States that we need to enhance partnerships and cooperation between the United Nations, governments and civil society to ensure effective overall implementation of the Millennium Declaration. I believe that to do this we need to explore innovative ways to enable civil society to contribute to this process at an early stage.

Regarding NGO participation, I recognize that a lot has been accomplished within the United Nations system and in individual conferences. But one has to note that for the moment, the involvement of NGOs in United Nations special sessions and conferences is negotiated case-by-case. It is a time- and resource-consuming exercise. I believe that the diversity of civil society should not stop us from exploring general, system-wide guidelines and harmonizing common practices and models. Various parts of the United Nations, NGO-focal points and Member States should compare and coordinate their experiences to identify best practices. In this context, full use should be made of the recommendations on how to further develop the relationship between NGOs and the United Nations put forward by the Secretary-General in his report two years ago.

To achieve best results it would also be important to hear from NGOs themselves their experiences on what works and what does not. There is a need for a dialogue and an exchange of views and this could take place through informal panels, hearings or the internet.

In order to be successful, partnerships need to be based on shared responsibilities and on mutual respect between all parties. Governments should practice inclusiveness and responsiveness. In return, civil society must interact with the rest of society in a constructive manner. The credibility that thousands of NGOs have created over many years must not be lost because of action by groups whose real aims are not related to enhancing the global agenda, but rather to their own self-promotion.

I encourage the United Nations and governments to organize hearings and start pilot projects with NGOs to find suitable best practices for each society and region to involve civil society. In these projects, representatives of local communities should be invited in at an early stage of planning.

Another issue, which I find particularly important is participation of NGOs from the South. Cooperation between the North and the South, but also between countries of the South, should aim

to strengthen the capacities of civil society and its organizations in developing countries and economies in transition. We should consider how to make these links more institutionalized, but not to an extent which stifles creativity.

The United Nations in the new Millennium needs support from governments, civil society, local communities and individuals. In this regard, the topic of this conference is important and timely. In my capacity as the President of the General Assembly, I pledge my co-operation with and support for initiatives being developed by civil society that are inclusive of all elements: NGOs, academics, religious leaders and the business community, and which are regionally and gender balanced, and cover all levels from the global to the grassroots.

I wish you a successful, forward-looking, and interesting meeting.