

30 May – 1 June 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
at the UN Civil Society Outreach Symposium**

When I was elected as President of the Millennium Assembly I set only a few priorities for myself knowing that my time in office was limited to one year. One of these priorities was to work for a more open United Nations and to reach out to civil society as a whole to fully benefit from its expertise and to make the United Nations more relevant to the outside world. Therefore, it gives me great pleasure to be here with you tonight to open this Symposium on UN Civil Society Outreach.

This Symposium is an excellent example of how connecting with people and NGOs outside the UN can help us within the Organisation to reach and accomplish our goals.

In taking up my office I had the idea that we should explore innovative ways and new avenues to enable civil society to contribute better and more effectively to the work of the United Nations system. But this initiative could be made real only with the help of two important civil society actors: the Stanley Foundation and the World Federation of United Nations Associations. I am truly grateful to you Mr. Stanley and Ms. Pietikäinen and the two organisations you represent for having taken up the challenge and the responsibility to organise this event - and I thank you for that. This Symposium demonstrates in a concrete manner that by working together with civil society we can accomplish our tasks. It also goes to show that we do not necessarily need to start with a 'Big Bang'. It is with small, but concrete steps that we can improve the working relationship between the UN and civil society.

One of the clear outcomes of the Summit was that the UN needs to work and co-operate with civil society to achieve the goals set in the Summit Declaration. Hence, building partnerships with civil society is not a choice, but a necessity. As President of the Assembly it is both my duty as well as a privilege to promote the implementation of the Declaration in this regard. I believe that both the UN and civil society as a whole can do better in terms of internal coherence and co-ordination.

During this Symposium our task should be to try to find new and better ways to work as partners in a team with the aim of fulfilling the agenda set for the UN. Working as partners is also in keeping with the letter of the UN Charter of being an Organisation of the peoples. We have a shared interest and I believe also a shared responsibility, to make things happen. We should try to make headway at all levels of cooperation: international, regional and national. In a globalized world we need to recognise that different civil society actors have different roles to play, and that they are all valuable and ultimately contribute to the same goals.

Time is limited. We only have two days. We cannot solve all the problems, but we must aim high and use all the experience and capacity present and available here in order to come up with concrete and innovative strategies on which we can build our forward-looking agenda within the UN system.

Finally, I should like to thank all participants for having taken the time from their busy schedules to participate in this event. As Patron of this event I am indeed impressed by the diversity and expertise amongst the participants. I encourage you to be creative and courageous and take advantage of this occasion in order to move our common agenda forward.

Let me propose a toast to a successful and productive UN - civil society relationship in the new Millennium!