

9 September 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,  
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,  
at the annual meeting of the World Federation of United Nations  
Associations**

One year after the adoption of the Millennium Declaration, I am particularly delighted and honoured to join this celebration with members of United Nations associations from all over the world. I would like to express my special thanks to you, Ambassador Donald Blinken, for inviting us here to discuss and to strengthen our links of cooperation.

I warmly welcome the efforts of the World Federation, as well as those of the national associations to show leadership in designing projects and policies to implement the Millennium agenda. The national associations, given their special UN connection and with representation in over one hundred countries, are in a special position to open new avenues for civil society to engage in productive dialogue and concrete projects with the UN. I would like to encourage you to continue developing this kind of bottom-up approach, which could provide a bridge from the field to the regional and global levels, as well as feed the policy think-tank process.

In my acceptance speech last September, I emphasized the necessity to further develop the relationship between civil society and the United Nations. At the Millennium Summit, Member States resolved to give civil society greater opportunities to contribute to the realization of the goals and programmes of the United Nations. The Millennium Declaration provided an enhanced mandate for civil society participation and partnership at the United Nations. The agenda for this meeting has two dimensions, because defining strategies to implement the Millennium goals implies finding new ways to develop the partnership between civil society and the United Nations.

To implement the Millennium Declaration, and to make the United Nations more relevant to the needs of the people, civil society outreach is a necessity. Civil society not only complements the role of the United Nations, but also makes it possible to bring people into the centre of our discussions and policy-making.

In this spirit, as President of the Assembly I have tried to follow-up the Declaration through my own initiatives. One of them was to initiate a symposium, where representatives of civil society, governments and the UN Secretariat could exchange views and consider concrete proposals for developing the relationship between civil society organizations and the United Nations. This civil society symposium took place three months ago, sponsored by the World Federation of United Nations Associations and the Stanley Foundation, under my patronage. It took a number of initiatives for the local, national, regional and international levels.

Let me now touch upon some of the proposals made at the symposium, in order to discuss and develop them further. One of the themes discussed at the symposium was the perception that civil society interacts with the United Nations at various levels; from field operations to UN meetings around the world. For some civil society actors, the main focus is the local level, while others are engaged with day-to-day work at UN Headquarters and reporting to their constituencies, sometimes to thousands of organizations. Given the variety of activities of civil society actors, it is important to ensure several entry-points and multi-level partnerships with civil society.

Participants at the symposium recognized that civil society already has several programmes in relation to the Millennium Declaration. It was suggested that the UN Secretariat should take those ongoing civil society activities into account when preparing the Road Map to implement the Millennium goals. And I am happy to report that after the symposium, the UN Secretariat has enhanced consultations with civil society actors in order to hear their views in this regard.

The UN needs to continue these efforts in order to ensure that civil society has a sense of ownership in the Millennium follow-up process. Each year, the UN will produce a report focusing on a specific theme in the Declaration. Inputs from civil society should be collected for these annual reports. Besides briefings and informal meetings with civil society, there are several options for consulting them. The participants at the symposium proposed that the annual DPI/NGO conference, starting tomorrow, is one platform where civil society can express their views and proposals on themes of the Millennium follow-up report. Next year, at the high-level segment of the ECOSOC in New York, civil society will have an opportunity to report on their undertakings towards implementation of the Declaration. Furthermore, all upcoming high-level meetings, such as the International Conference on Financing for Development in Mexico, and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa, will serve as integral parts of the follow-up process and should encourage civil society to elaborate its role in the process. I consider these meetings very important as they will give a voice to national initiatives in reaching the Millennium targets.

During my tenure of office it has become clear to me that the institutional memory of the United Nations regarding the best practices of civil society participation should be recorded and carried over to the future. This way, we could build on previous experiences and focus on innovative ways to make civil society participation meaningful at all levels. Responding to this need, my office prepared a reference document on the legislative history of participation of civil society at United Nations conferences and special sessions of the General Assembly during the 1990s. This document is now available at the UN Web site ([un.org/ga/president](http://un.org/ga/president)). It illustrates trends in civil society access, and proves that negotiating civil society access case-by-case is a time- and resources-consuming exercise. It also shows that the outcome is not necessarily compatible each time. The diversity of civil society should not hold us back from comparing these experiences and exploring guidelines for harmonization of common practices and models. I have been assured by the Secretariat that there are plans to continue this study and broaden its scope into good practices established at the UN secretariat, funds and programmes. The NGO community is also currently collecting oral history and lessons learned from the NGO participation.

There is a need to discuss innovative options for reforming the working relationship between civil society organizations and the General Assembly, both in terms of their official status as well as meeting formulas. Some UN agencies have successfully used various forms of information and communication technologies to increase multilevel dialogue with civil society partners. Knowledge of these examples should be exchanged and more broadly adopted. Another proposal by the symposium would be to learn, from the experience of other UN organs and processes, how to organize hearings with relevant civil society representatives in order to listen to their views.

Another issue which I consider critical when we discuss how to develop the relationship between the UN and civil society is the accountability of civil society actors. While governments can be voted out of office and businesses are increasingly swayed by corporate ethics, there is yet no clear general monitoring mechanism for civil society. I was very pleased to note that at the symposium this issue was debated. I understand that participants concluded that issues concerning code of conduct, self-regulation, and peer review are complex and require separate consideration from civil society itself. I encourage you to engage actively in these discussions.

The outcome of the symposium also included some proposals concerning the Office of the General Assembly President. Symposium participants felt that the President of the General Assembly could have a central and catalytic role in reinforcing and improving relations with civil society. It was suggested that the President could meet periodically with representatives of civil society so as to create a regular contact point between his office and civil society. Each of these informal meetings could concentrate on current thematic issues under General Assembly consideration and involve a varying range of NGO representatives. I considered this a good initiative, and a month ago I invited some NGO representatives to a meeting to consider how these encounters could be best arranged in practice. It proved to be a very useful meeting and a detailed report of it can be found on my Web site. I have encouraged my successor to continue this tradition.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize the interconnectedness of the Millennium Forum and Millennium Summit, as well as their follow-up processes. They provide us with a historical momentum to embark on a true partnership between civil society and the United Nations. I wish you a successful meeting.