

10 September 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
at the 54th Annual DPI/NGO Conference NGOs Today: Diversity of
the Volunteer Experience**

I am pleased and honoured to meet you here on a theme of exceptional relevance to the implementation of the Millennium Summit targets. I would like to express special thanks to all organizers and participants for the time and effort they have invested in this event. As President of the Millennium Assembly, I warmly welcome you all.

Almost exactly one year ago, at the Millennium Summit, Member States pledged to strengthen the United Nations in order to achieve the goals outlined in the Millennium Declaration. For this reason, Member States resolved to give civil society greater opportunities to contribute to the realization of the goals and programmes of the United Nations. Following this call by Member States, I took civil society outreach as one of my priorities as the President of the Millennium Assembly.

We have an historic opportunity to build a new dialogue and dynamics, as well as multi-level partnerships and entry-points between civil society and the United Nations. The UN was established as an inter-governmental body to serve the people. Now, in order to achieve sustainable results, we must broaden our constituency and explore innovative ways to enable civil society to contribute our work, starting at an early planning stage. We have a long common history and the new Millennium has intensified the need to strengthen this relationship. Globalization itself means that problems are more complex and interrelated. This necessitates a comprehensive approach, where no actor can be excluded.

In the beginning of the new millennium, we are experiencing the rise of a new global community. A number of players and their individual significance have increased. The emergence of a strong, viable, and skillful global civil society network is a fact.

In the midst of the speed of change and market forces, it has become more difficult to define the division of labour among various players. Even more demanding is the challenge of holding claim some individuals, institutions or entities accountable and responsible for developments in the world, because it may be impossible to see all the causes and consequences of one single action.

Although humankind is endowed with immense resources and has registered dazzling technological achievements, the fact that no one seems to be in the driver's seat or in charge of global issues leaves people feeling powerless. This way, globalization can be argued to have led to a democracy deficit, where traditional ways of popular participation are not sufficient for

citizens. Yet, more than ever, individuals have the power to move mountains and influence global policy-making.

Volunteerism is partly a response to these challenges, and one solution to the increasing need for global citizens to take concrete action. All social movements have started with ideas and actions by individuals. Human capital is still humankind's most powerful source of change and well-being of humankind and not the market economy or technological and scientific innovations as such. Even achievements in information and communication technologies are not goals themselves but instruments for advancing knowledge which would then help in tackle poverty, injustices, and exclusion. When several people take action to the same direction, such as within the global volunteer movement, diverse backgrounds and experiences are combined and make it possible to step out from conventional patterns of answers, to make a difference.

Building the world community is important, because it gives a framework to manage globalization through global politics and global governance. In the new world community, the leading principles should be dialogue, inclusion, and cooperation. Partnerships need to be based on shared responsibilities and on mutual respect among players. 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 aims are not related to enhancing the global agenda.

We need to elaborate more on core values of humankind in the context of globalization. The responsibility of individuals, corporations and collectivities is one of the most important factors in building a world society and global citizenship. Volunteerism is an expression of individual and collective responsibility, a participation channel enabling us to bring people into the centre of our discussions and policy-making. It means reaching out to other people and membership of a larger community, as it involves cooperation between volunteers also in the North and the South, and among countries of the South.

Civil society organizations present a great diversity, and it almost seems there are no common denominators. However, at the Millennium Forum last year, over one thousand civil society actors from all over the world were able to define and to agree upon common priorities and to reach beyond geographical and issue-oriented barriers. The Forum Declaration is the first official UN document produced exclusively by civil society.

We in the United Nations must ensure that civil society has a sense of ownership in the Millennium follow-up process. The substantive goals and commitments of the Millennium Forum and the Millennium Summit are very much interrelated. This signifies that the activities of governments and civil society are not disconnected, but rather that they complement each other and even share the same values and goals. Inputs from civil society should be collected for the annual UN reports on implementation of the Summit goals. In fact participants at the civil society symposium, organized under my patronage last May, suggested that these annual DPI/NGO conferences are one of those platforms, where civil society could express their views and

proposals on annual themes of the Millennium follow-up report. This is a proposal you may want to consider when you plan the upcoming themes of these meetings.

It is my firm belief, after one year in this office, 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. In this way, we could build on previous experiences and focus on novel ways to make civil society participation meaningful at all levels. I should like to recall the point I made during my first official trip to Vienna, at the tri-annual meeting of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in consultative status with the United Nations. I stressed that the diversity of civil society should not hold the UN back from comparing experiences on civil society participation and exploring guidelines to harmonize and coordinate common practices and models. I am therefore pleased to note that within the UN system there are now plans to continue the study prepared by my office on the legislative history of the participation of civil society at United Nations conferences and special sessions of the General Assembly during the 1990s. To achieve best results, it would be important to learn from NGOs themselves their experiences of what works and what does not. I have been informed that the NGO community is already collecting oral history and lessons learned from NGO participation. I trust the UN-secretariat will follow up by broadening the scope of the study into good practices established within the UN system.

The spirit of the Millennium Summit has lead and inspired our deliberations during the past 12 months. I encourage you to continue the bottom-up approach, which feeds the global policy think-tank process with experiences from the local and regional levels. Personally, I admire the devotion and commitment of volunteers in donating countless hours to advance the well-being of others. The International Year of Volunteers is about celebrating the notion that the world needs good examples, such as the one set by volunteerism.