

NGO perspectives: NGOs and the Security Council

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While the Security Council is the most powerful body of the United Nations, for decades it has been strongly criticized for working behind closed doors. During the exhaustive debate about Security Council reform, NGOs have raised parallel questions regarding the transparency of the Council's work, asserting their interest and expertise as relevant to the Council and its efforts. Since the end of the Cold War, Security Council members have increasingly turned to NGOs as partners and service contractors, in emergency and post-emergency situations under the Council's authority.

The President of the Security Council, Ambassador Richard Ryan of Ireland, presented the annual report of the Security Council to the General Assembly on 15 October 2001, stating that the Council, 'had conducted business as transparently as possible, holding many public meetings and broadening the participation of a wider United Nations membership.' Responses to the Council report echo many of the issues that have been raised since the establishment (in January 1994) of the governmental Open-ended Working Group on the Question of Equitable Representation on and Increase in the Membership of the Security Council. Many delegations welcomed the increase in open debates, involving all Member States of the United Nations, as a positive step forward, but none have acknowledged in formal statements the role of NGOs in bringing information, visibility and assistance to the United Nations.

While many NGOs have developed an individual relationship with the fifteen Security Council members, routinely providing relevant analysis and information from their field operations, it was the establishment of the NGO Working Group on the Security Council in 1995, spearheaded by the Global Policy Forum,¹ that caused a shift in NGO-Council relations.

Although it faced difficulties in the beginning, the NGO Working Group on the Security Council instituted a mechanism for off-the-record dialogue between around thirty organizations and Council members. These exchanges are not official Council briefings, but rather a dialogue between NGOs and the Council member or President speaking in his or her national capacity. NGOs have found these exchanges to be particularly useful in decoding the resolutions and statements of the Council for their members around the world. The meetings also give NGOs an opportunity to ask questions and provide relevant information and feedback to the Security Council.

Key individual ambassadors, while serving on the Council as elected members, encouraged this development. In early 1996, Ambassador Juan Somavía of Chile gave strong encouragement to the idea of ongoing dialogue with NGOs by speaking to a public meeting on the subject. Ambassador Fulci of Italy was also enthusiastic about the work of the group and presented the notion of regular NGO briefings to the Council. The exchanges organized by the NGO Working Group have now

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become routine, with most Security Council delegations participating enthusiastically in the nuanced and focused dialogue.

Ambassador Arria of Venezuela, through inviting members to gather over coffee in the Delegates Lounge to hear the views of a Bosnian priest in 1993, created what has become known as the 'Arria Formula', an informal exchange between Council members and NGOs. The Arria Formula has been used more regularly since 1999 to provide expertise and testimony on thematic issues taken up by the Council, in particular on humanitarian issues, the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Children and Armed Conflict and more recently on Women, Peace and Security. The President of the Council does not chair Arria Formula meetings, which must take place outside the Council chamber and are strictly off-the-record and unofficial. Usually a UN agency or department works with the delegation chairing the meeting to approve the list of NGO speakers, and particularly to get clearance from Security Council members on the country situations they will speak about. In 2000 the Arria Formula evolved to allow other Member States to attend on the condition that they wrote to the President of the Council asking for permission to attend.

Role of Arria Formula meetings leading to resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security

On International Women's Day in 2000 Ambassador Chowdhury of Bangladesh issued a Security Council Presidential Statement, which acknowledged for the first time the role of women in peace processes. Soon afterwards, and encouraged by Ambassador Chowdhury, the NGO Working Group on Women and International Peace and Security² came together to push the Security Council to hold a thematic debate on the role of women in international peace and security. After holding an Arria Formula meeting with NGOs and an open debate, the Council under the Namibian Presidency passed resolution 1325³ on Women, Peace and Security on 31 October 2000. This groundbreaking resolution linked gender equality to global security and committed governments to include women's voices in peace negotiations while protecting them from the abuses of war.

The Arria Formula meeting on 23 October 2000 prior to the open session of the Security Council on Women, Peace and Security gave representatives of women's NGOs from Sierra Leone, Guatemala, Somalia and Tanzania a chance to explain their work, demonstrate their competence and submit their recommendations on a large number of issues.⁴ The women from Sierra Leone emphasized the tens of thousands of babies left by the ECOMOG troops and the need for programmes and services for women ex-combatants. The women from Somalia spoke of the costs to the UN and local community when human rights violations are committed by peacekeepers, emphasizing the need for disciplinary measures and gender training. The women from Guatemala had an opportunity to share the positive results achieved from being part of peace negotiations from the beginning but stressed the need for ongoing support in the implementation phase.

Among other issues, the NGO Working Group highlighted the role of the Security Council as outlined in the UN Charter, 'Article 26 of the UN Charter calls for "the establishment of a system for the regulation of armaments" to ensure that the world's human and economic resources are not diverted towards armaments. We feel that the Council needs to fulfil this role, now more than ever, in order to address one of the primary root causes of war, which is militarism—the actual preparation for war.' The NGO Working Group presented thirty-two recommendations to the Arria Formula meeting on the need for increased women personnel at senior levels in all UN departments and missions, indicating that information on women should appear in reports prepared by the Secretariat and submitted by the Secretary-General.

At the Arria Formula meeting of 30 October 2001, held to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the adoption of resolution 1325, the NGO Working Group and a representative from the Afghan Women's Network, an umbrella group of 300 organizations, praised and thanked the Council for resolution 1325 and then presented a challenge: Afghanistan offers an opportunity for the UN system to demonstrate its commitment to resolution 1325, both in terms of women's protection and their participation in prevention, conflict resolution and peace-building. Jamila, a representative of the Afghan Women's Network, said, 'Do not think that because women wear a veil we do not have a voice. When the UN is looking for leaders, look to us. We want an Afghanistan free of extremism, in all its forms. We remember a time when women were doctors, lawyers and judges. Tap our networks that reach and assist women and their families. Women must be included in any peace-building efforts to ensure peace and lasting security.' The Secretary-General's Special Representative on Afghanistan, Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, was personally invited to engage, consult and ensure that women were part of the solution in Afghanistan, which he has endeavoured to do in his first weeks on the job.

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Resolution 1325 has a broad global constituency, supported by a vibrant women's movement that has welcomed the political legitimacy given by the Council to their long struggle for a seat at the negotiating table. The opportunities presented by Arria Formula meetings to give testimony, recommendations and to respond to questions have been important rallying and organizing opportunities for NGOs who have widely advertised and reported on their input to these meetings to the press and through their networks. As a result, women's NGOs have felt more interested and invested in monitoring the Security Council and have been encouraged to insist that the actions of its peacekeeping missions in the field are consistent with decisions taken in the blue room in New York.

The Council has also been making greater use of field visits, with groups of ambassadors visiting the Democratic Republic of the Congo, East Timor, Kosovo and Sierra Leone in the past year. Resolution 1325 expressed the Council's willingness to ensure that missions to the field take into account gender considerations, 'including through consultation with local and international women's groups'. Working with relevant UN departments, the NGO Working Group has helped to ensure that meetings take place between women's NGOs in the field and Council members. During the mission to Kosovo (June 2001), a group of women had an opportunity to speak to Council members—at 22h30 in an ambassador's hotel room. Despite the unfortunate time and venue, the meeting was a success, and resulted in a Security Council expression of support for the efforts of Kosovan women in a Presidential Statement to the Press (SC/7077). At this meeting Tom Koenigs, the Deputy Special Representative for Civil Administration, outlined steps which the United Nations Interim Administration Mission In Kosovo (UNMIK) would take to promote better cooperation with women's groups.

Keeping a foot in the door

Each time the Security Council opens the door to NGOs, the opportunity is welcomed. While the substance of comments and questions posed by Council members at Arria Formula meetings are off-the-record, it should be noted that comments are genuinely thoughtful and the questions tough, inviting follow-up communication between NGOs and Council members on a bilateral basis. On the negative side, these meetings are tightly structured, with some delegations sending junior staff who are not inclined to engage. For the first Arria meeting on women, some difficulties were experienced

in negotiating the country situations that would be given exposure, with some NGO representatives from countries on the Council agenda being rejected outright. Importantly, when the opportunity has been won and well prepared for, there is usually very little time to respond fully to questions posed by the Council members. In addition, some of the women feel disappointed by the UN interpretation of dialogue—the reading of prepared texts—when anticipating actual discussion. Women from the field and women working at the international level experience a tension between making their voices and truth heard and an agenda and style quite foreign to their culture as activists and women.

Security Council members have also conducted consultations outside of the Arria format. For example, Ambassador Jeremy Greenstock of the United Kingdom simply invited key individuals, experts from UN agencies and NGOs around a table at the Mission of the United Kingdom to flag

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issues prior to a Security Council mission to Sierra Leone he was heading. After the lengthy negotiations for an Arria Formula, the efficiency and productivity of this exercise was breathtaking! Meeting a range of interested and qualified experts outside formal structures is a very good way to access practical, timely and focused information, although the danger of relying on the same old experts and organizations is very real. My own organization along with many others has found it essential to conduct one-on-one meetings that

provide a range of experts and information from the field, and while these are time consuming for both NGOs and Security Council delegations, the potential flow of assistance and information for both parties is worth the effort.

Conclusion

The fact that NGOs push the boundaries, provide information and make demands is what makes them simultaneously useful and dangerous. For women so newly discovered by the Security Council, using this tension creatively and strategically is not easily done and sometimes results in a choice between debilitating self-editing or causing offence. Going into detail about the rape, sexual violence and the torture of Somalis by UN peacekeepers, for example, was essential, yet risked confirming myths about sensationalist, emotive, vulgar NGOs. Indicating our dissatisfaction with the Secretary-General's reports received by the Security Council that do not contain adequate information on the situation of women in the field or gender disaggregated data as called for by resolution 1325, is necessary—yet potentially alienates NGOs from allies within the Secretariat. Criticizing the Brahimi Report on Peace Operations for being gender blind caused offence, but NGO activities that highlighted these deficiencies while constructively engaging on this issue of peacekeeping have helped to build bridges between Mr. Brahimi himself and women's NGOs.

As the Council changes its working methods, formal channels should be developed for it to receive information from a variety of sources, including NGOs.

Notes

1. www.globalpolicy.org
2. The NGO Working Group is made up of Amnesty International, Hague Appeal for Peace, International Alert, International Women's Tribune Center, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, Women's Caucus for Gender Justice and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.
3. www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf
4. All statements made by women's NGOs to Arria Formula meetings are online at www.peacewomen.org