IDSN Notes

The Committee on NGOs – Improving working methods encouraging civil society engagement, 19 June 2017, New York

State Co sponsors of the event:
UK, France and Uruguay

Speakers:
- Robert Mahoney (Committee to Protect Journalists)
- Janet Love (Legal Resource Centre)
- Camila Asano (Conectas Direitos Humanos) - via skype, with video presentation as back up
- Henri Tiphagne (International Dalit Solidarity Network)
- Eleanor Openshaw, International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)

At the start an **Ambassador from France** spoken on behalf of co-sponsors on the importance of CS and contribution to the work of UN. He noted that a number of applications increased and stressed the importance of ensuring that the Committee takes timely and effective decision on those applications and transparency of the process. The event was on improving the working methods of the NGO Committee and webcasting of its sessions was a great step forward.

An **Ambassador from Uruguay** spoke about its initiative on webcasting which was part of their activities under a group called Act, concerned with transparency at the UN. He noted that CS is crucial in achieving SDGs and appealed for more states in 2018 to stand for the Committee.

Eleanor Openshaw noted that whilst the role pf CS is acknowledged by the UN the restrictions in place mimic restrictions globally.

Robert Mahoney spoke about his organisation's experience in getting ECOSOC status, which was deferred 7 times and a rejection overruled at ECOSOC having gained support from Ban Ki-moon, France and the US, as well as having a great access to media all being journalists in his organisation. He asked how organisations with less resources, not based in NY and no such access to media would be able to go through this, calling the process obstructionist and politicised.

Janet Love (South Africa) spoke about her organisation which faced 5 rounds or repeated questions, worked with SR and other organisations and state delegations. She called NGO Committee a gatekeeper rather than a gateway and the process very unclear where delegations cannot easily be held to account, the process is inconsistent and intend to block organisations from participating at the UN.

Camila Asano (Brazil via Skype) spoke about the intended Committee's role in fostering CS participation, allowing the UN to be connected to what is happening on the ground and feed relevant information. She highlights three reasons for NGOs needing ECOSOC status: 1) to be heard; 2) allow CS to use other than national tools when they are not successful to strengthen national work; 3) to increase voices from the Global South and diversify the voices, strengthen work done by the Global South organisations, noting the importance of using remote access for interaction.

Eleanor introduced Henri noting that IDSN has the longest pending application, almost 10 years, facing compound exclusion.

Henri Tiphagne spoke about IDSN struggles for the last 9 years with the application, noting that IDSN was formed in 2000 aiming to give voice to 260 million of people affected by caste-based discrimination, which was possible because the CERD included caste in its General Comment in 1997,

followed by the UN principles and guidelines and Durban conference where the issue was presented to the global community. In 2007 IDSN made an application and since continued receiving questions from one state. The questions had lost creativity and continued to be repeated and requesting information which is available on IDSN website.

IDSN participated in a number of Geneva events, raising issues of Dalit women, bonded labour, manual scavenging, etc, getting powerful statement made by the High Commissioner, noted in resolutions, attended side events organised by OHCHR and state missions, funded by the EU, raised issues at various treaty bodies and UPRs. He asked a question of 'what is wrong with our application?' He sais ' this is a reprisal leading to exclusion of millions of people who want to be included'. He stated that no one is willing to stand on behalf of IDSN.

Some question were directed at Henri on the situation of IDSN, including which country has posed questions, if it served on the Committee all this time and if we did seek support or used other gateways. Henri gave an example of his organisation which has been sanctioned simply for speaking to SR and states. He said that IDSN survived by taking a floor on behalf of its members and was challenged on whether we organise side events and how they are funded.

Freedom Now representative spoke about some of the areas for improvement and suggested changes:

- Article 61 of ECOSOC resolution adopted in 1961 calls for consultation meetings between the NGO Committee and CS to take place which has not happened at least in the last few years.

- Up to 2016 CS organisations were allowed to make statements during the sessions but this was blocked and no longer happening.

Suggested changes to the Committee's membership:

a) Increase membership, including more diverse states which appreciate CS.

b) Increase membership, as seen at ECOSOC higher number of members brings completely different results.

c) Impose term limits to states on the Committee, this might help to get a more open body.

Currently one state can raise a question, which is enough to defer an application even if the question it is asking in on an already supplied information or a repeat question. As a result, a CS organisation can get stuck. Rules, working methods and guidelines of the Committee are unclear. She suggested to:

a) Change guidelines through a resolution

b) Put procedures in place in managing questions, for instance for a chair to strike questions that are not related to a matter or an already asked question.

c) Previously CS organisations had to be present in NY for Q&A but now due to webcasting it could allow NGOs to provide immediate responses.

Other suggestions on the Committee changes:

- More engagement from ECOSOC, to step in, for instance on behalf of organisations that have been deferred for many years.

- Dissolve the Committee and design an entirely new system

a) It becomes an administrative/ bureaucratic mechanism and if needed goes for a vote at ECOSOC

b) The Committee becomes a mix of states and CS representatives

c) Its members are volunteers from 5 regions such as Working Groups under treaty bodies

During a Q&A points raised:

- Need to improve functionality

- Simplify the procedures (grassroots organisations are unable to follow the process)

- Australia helped two NGOs get their ECOSOC status and is about to launch a new handbook for NGOs with ISHR on 10 July.

- Other states do not put their names forward to become members at the Committee hence states serve many terms

- Within the Committee there is a strong push back not to question other states' questions.

- A lot of push back against CS speaking since 2016.

- NGO Committee plans to prepare a handbook on ECOSOC application and has organised regular webinars, which they believe is a reason for an increase in the applications.

For final words Henri added that IDSN did explore various avenues on gaining support to its ECOSOC application, including lobbying states, EU, getting a SR on freedom of assembly and association making a statement in 2014 and sending an open letter with a number of other NGOs. Yet, it continues to have repetitive deferrals by one state. He called on a review of that country's national human rights records and test its independence. He added that having access to web streaming is very significant in reaching wider communities as proven during the last UPR of India.