
UN's Social Conference Process and the Social Watch Experience

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Abstract

The experience of Social Watch has been remarkable with respect to the way CS networks around the world have mobilized to monitor the implementation of poverty eradication, gender equity and social development targets. In the new global context, what lessons from the Social Watch experience can be useful to CSOs in their efforts to impact the global policy agenda and contribute to the implementation of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

Introduction

The visibility and influence acquired by international civil society networks in the last few years has been quite surprising, a phenomenon that observers of world politics have widely acknowledged over the last decade. Although not an entirely new phenomenon, the circumstances under which this has occurred lead to a reflection on its significance. As promoters of a human rights approach not strictly or exclusively linked to the nation-state, international civil society networks are playing an important role in combating the disintegrating forces built into several aspects of globalization.

To a large extent, these networks are the main spokespersons for a “counter-hegemonic globalization” (Santos, 1998). The international order that arose from the ruins of two world wars is facing intense pressures to implement radical changes in the composition, mandate, and structure of its main institutions. The debate on so-called “global governance” refers mainly to the exhaustion of the post-world wars’ model. In this context, the role of international NGO networks is the object of a stimulating discussion, not always limited to the predominantly virtuous aspects of these organizations.²

Unfolding United Nations processes offer one of the best angles for observing the ongoing changes in the international order. They reveal tensions generated in structures, mainly limited to government actors, when these structures are submitted to increasing pressures from civil society organizations. The active effective presence of NGOs at intergovernmental processes and negotiations in the framework of ECOSOC (UN Economic and Social Council) throughout the 90s remains a landmark in recent UN history.

The social cycle of conferences in the 1990s was extremely innovating in two fundamental aspects. First, the debate on development was re-launched beyond strict economic assumptions. The linkages between themes involving the environment, human rights

² See Micheal Edwards' s *NGO Rights and Responsibilities: A New Deal for Global Governance* (London: The Foreign Policy Center, 2000); and Lisa Jordan's and Peter van Tuijl's "Political Responsibility in Transnational NGO Advocacy," *World Development*, V.28, No. 12 (2000): 2051-2065.

and women (among others), and development, called into question traditional economic-based thinking about development policies. This process evolved while the UNDP consolidated the concept of “human development” and reviewed the progress of countries in this new perspective by publishing the annual Human Development Index (HDI).

Second, it provided the institutional basis for national NGOs to play an increasingly active role in building global agendas and monitoring the commitments made by governments. Within the UN System, NGOs would “politicize” negotiations, introducing local struggles and political processes into the discussions. The role of NGOs in the United Nations became that of conveying ideas and innovations and acting as information sources, funding agents, agreement negotiators, strategy formulators, and conflict mediators.³

Social Watch Is...

An international network informed by national citizens' groups aiming at following up the fulfillment of the internationally agreed commitments on poverty eradication and equality. These national groups report, through the national Social Watch report, on the progress –or regression— towards these commitments and goals.

The Social Watch groups, organized on an ad hoc basis, have a focal point in each country that is responsible for promoting the initiative; submitting a national report for the yearly publication; undertaking lobbying initiatives before the national authorities to hold them accountable for the policies in place regarding the agreed commitments; promoting a dialogue about the national social development priorities and developing an active inclusive strategy to include other groups into the national group.

Source:
<http://www.socialwatch.org/en/acercaDe/index.htm>
(Eds.)

Social Watch was created from and responded to that context. Social Watch resulted from both this process of interaction as well as in reaction to the problems the international system was and still is confronting to this day. The need and possibility of building world-scale democracy and the future role of the UN continue to be at stake, as are the necessary mechanisms of social control and accountability. In the coming years, the place of the UN in the world scene will be crucial in determining the shape of the 21st century's international order. A weak and demoralized UN would not help consolidate international relations based on minimal agreements for the respect of human rights and the promotion of democratic principles. In this regard, the situation further deteriorated during Bush's administration in the United States, particularly since an aggressive defence doctrine based on pre-empting military attacks was put in place as part of the so called “war against terror”.

A simple —but complex— idea

The Social Watch initiative originated from a quite simple idea: commitments assumed by governments must be fulfilled. Thus, civil society needed an effective instrument to monitor governments and demand that they comply with what they had pledged. This was called the “strategy of shame”. This concept was shared by a group of NGOs who saw the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) in 1995 as an excellent opportunity for governments to commit

to an agenda for social change that would affect both international and national policies.⁴

³ See Thomas G. Weiss and Leon Gordenker, Eds. *NGOs, the UN & Global Governance*. (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers), 1996.

⁴ For a detailed and extremely interesting account of Social Watch's origins, I recommend reading Mirjam van Reizen's *The 'Prehistory' of 'Social Watch': The transforming of NGO Networking in ongoing International Negotiations* (Montevideo: Social Watch), March 2000.

The participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) trying to influence results ensuing from the Social Summit preparatory process (PrepComs) was fundamental in shaping the concept of Social Watch. The Development Caucus set up at the WSSD PrepCom II revealed a common interest among several organizations in clearing a space during the preparatory process for those motivated not just by specific themes – such as the environment or human rights, – which had been the hallmark of meetings prior to Copenhagen. In fact, the WSSD attracted a diverse group and seemed to interest both everybody and nobody.

Dialogue between the Development Caucus and the other networks intervening in the preparatory process, particularly the women's networks, was essential. This exchange of ideas led to identifying the need for a mechanism to keep governments under ongoing vigilance regarding the Copenhagen commitments. Incorporating commitments assumed at the World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995) and those assumed at Copenhagen into Social Watch's monitoring priorities has consolidated an approach built together with women's networks involved in this process, especially the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) and Development Alternatives with women for a New Era (DAWN Networks).

However, monitoring was not the only concern, and perhaps not even the most important of Social Watch's contributions to the exploration of new modes of CS participation in international processes. **The effort to link global processes to the dynamics of national struggles strikes me as the most innovative and challenging aspect of this experience.** Social Watch's main contribution was to facilitate building reliable bridges between negotiation processes, lobbying and monitoring initiatives in the UN, and struggles and priorities defined in accordance with national political processes. The organization achieved these objectives through two strategies. First, it included both Northern and Southern organizations working side-by-side through the networks. Second, it applied a two-pronged "translation" effort to its approach: first, what had been negotiated at the international spheres had to make sense at national levels; and second, national political processes should have an impact on international negotiations. To the extent that it gradually achieved this two-pronged strategy, Social Watch gained political legitimacy.

Monitoring the extent to which wealthy countries implement the pledges made at conferences is a key novelty. Having North and South members (although the vast majority of them are from the latter) has been essential in enabling the rich countries to internalize their commitments. This obviously results in enormous methodological challenges, particularly when it comes to assessing progress and regression in the fulfillment of goals. The Index of Fulfilled Commitments incorporates the starting point to evaluate the advances made by each country in the various monitored commitments.⁵

Thus, Social Watch's working method has sought to break with the traditional unilateral approach in North-South solidarity relations. The impacts and consequences of globalization are felt in both the rich Northern countries and the poor Southern nations – albeit in a most unequal way. One may agree with the concept that social exclusion processes are resulting in the coexistence of a "North in the South" and a "South in the North". Any strategy for social change has to take this into account. The participation of important European nongovernmental cooperation agencies such as Novib has also helped in understanding the role of these organizations as something other than the one they naturally play as fund providers.⁶

⁵ Regarding this issue, see the chapters on methodology in the annual Social Watch reports.

⁶ The ambiguity that results from this double position is discussed by Reisen (op. cit) and also in an internal evaluation document prepared by Novib itself and authored by Peter van Tuijl & Hannah Apell called "Rock Around the Clock: A Self-Evaluation of Novib's Role Regarding Social Watch." July 2000.

Building national coalitions

Mobilizing social actors at the national level is one of the key challenges for Social Watch, insofar as it legitimizes its participation in UN negotiations. Building “national platforms” is crucial to setting up the network’s supporting architecture. The annual publication of a report evaluating the implementation of commitments is both a lobbying tool to pressure governments and a vehicle for national mobilization.

In the framework of preparing the report’s national chapters, the organizations responsible for Social Watch in each country – the “social watchers” – mobilize networks, social movements, NGOs, intellectuals, and other social actors making up the network’s “national platforms”. The key role of these platforms is to act as spaces for dialogue that are open to diversity and controversy. They are also involved in awareness-raising within civil society and in applying pressure on governments. Since 1996, we have seen the consolidation of platforms in Africa, Central America, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, the Philippines, and the Arab world. In addition, Social Watch currently has reference groups that ensure publication of annual reports on a regular basis in about fifty countries.

Poverty eradication strategies and Social Watch in a national context: The example of Brazil

The Brazilian experience is an interesting example of how Social Watch tried to influence national public policies pushing for their link to global interests. Brazilian organizations working with the Network employed different participatory mechanisms. First, they pursued a cooperative process between different social sectors, including NGOs, women’s organizations, trade unions, academic research institutions, environmentalists and various social movements/networks (i.e., the landless movement, human rights coalitions and indigenous people’s organizations). Once a year, Social Watch organized a national seminar inviting these groups to examine whether or not different sets of public policies comply with the goals that were set in Copenhagen and Beijing. These seminars were also important instances of cross-sectoral dialogue between governmental and civil society representatives. One of their main objectives was the fair representation of these two groups.

The annual seminars aside, Social Watch’s Brazilian initiative organized issue-oriented workshops or dialogues whose purpose was the closer evaluation of specific policies. It was also a way to increase the contribution to the Social Watch process from participating groups and individuals concerned with specific aspects of the social agenda. This has been particularly successful in the areas of gender and racial discrimination.

The Brazilian Social Watch initiative has made a permanent effort to reach a high level of cooperation between different organizations and sectors dealing with the social agenda. The experience so far has been extremely rich as it further presents a possibility for overcoming a certain level of fragmentation that still exists amongst those organizations working on social issues and poverty eradication.

A second important mechanism used by the Social Watch initiative in Brazil was the production of a “Brazilian edition” of their international report. The intention behind this special edition was to generate a publication where the chapter on Brazil brought more substance than what is possible within the limited space available in the international edition. The Brazilian edition thus carries a 60-page section fully dedicated to the analysis of different aspects related to the implementation of the conference commitments in Brazil as well as how public policies are responding to them.

The production of this section is a political process in itself, as it demands an effort to identify within the network of organizations related to the Social Watch Platform in Brazil, those holding the expertise and capacity to conduct the analysis. The content covered in this section also includes the discussions and suggestions made during the annual seminar and

workshops. It becomes the main evaluative measure, in terms of the written assessment of policies, produced in the context of this national Social Watch initiative.

A third mechanism was the publication of a series of papers called *Cadernos do Observatório*. These “papers” covered various themes related to the agenda of the UN’s social conferences. However the papers also had an educational purpose. They dealt with issues and problems that were not undertaken as commitments to be monitored by the Social Watch initiative in Brazil. Offering an opportunity to be more focused on particular issues, these *Cadernos* are important instructional materials for the diverse sectors involved with the Network in Brazil.

The seminars, workshops and publications produced in Brazil are essential tools to make the Social Watch initiative a relevant reference point when dealing with how the UN’s social agenda relate to national policies. The mass media’s growing attention to the assessments and proposals issued by Social Watch in Brazil is a sign of the organization’s effectiveness. Social Watch’s public visibility in Brazil played an important role in integrating the pledges made during the UN conferences into the national agenda. This was a crucial step in achieving social progress particularly as Brazil entered a period of great expectations under a government professing a strong commitment to social development.⁷

UN Plus Five Assessments and the Millennium Development Goals

The ability to act as a reliable and consistent voice for civil societies around the world elevated Social Watch’s legitimacy within the UN system. The first round of reviews of the implementation of the commitments made during the social conferences put the network in the positions of reliable informant and analyst based on their efforts through the national platforms. The Copenhagen + 5 process is a good example of how Social Watch managed to play a difficult inside-outside role without de-politicizing its identity as a nationally grounded international network.

By the Copenhagen+5 PrepCom (leading up to the 2000 Geneva Summit), UN circles already knew Social Watch as one of the key and most influential civil society networks participating in the conference process. Its presence at the annual sessions of the Commission on Social Development (CSD) which is responsible for the Social Summit follow-up has decisively enhanced its legitimacy.. Formulating the Index of Fulfilled Commitments has created a reference point that did not exist in any previous follow-up processes for other conferences in the social cycle. This has reminded governments that they are no longer meeting just amongst themselves in UN halls and meeting rooms. Above all, it has focused attention on the fact that promises put on paper should have practical consequences on national and international policies.

The presence of Social Watch’s national platform representatives in New York has strengthened the visibility of the initiative, focusing the attention of government delegates and UN-system agencies on demands stemming from national processes. Once again, it was its two-pronged national-to-global/global-to-national strategy at work. In the same fashion that Social Watch tried to translate the Social Summit commitments into national targets, releasing the international reports at the CSD session in New York exposed the contradictions of national government policies to the international public. Social Watch attended the Copenhagen+5 PrepCom II with about twenty national representatives (13 from Southern countries).⁸

⁷ The wide press coverage obtained during the launching of the 2004 Brazilian edition of the Social Watch Report, when a number of civil society leaders criticized the macroeconomic policy of Lula’s government is an example of the impact and legitimacy of this initiative.

⁸ See “Social Watch Progress Report,” June 99-May 2000. (Montevideo: Social Watch, 2000).

One of the first measures adopted by Social Watch was to define a benchmark with points for inclusion in the Social Summit review. The same strategy had been successfully adopted during the Copenhagen Summit preparatory process where the twelve-point document entitled *Quality Benchmark*, written jointly with the Development Caucus and the Women's Caucus, made it possible to mobilize support from a large number of social organizations around the world. In a way, the *Quality Benchmark* was a dress rehearsal of the network's working method, with intense use of communication over the Internet, as an essential tool for the participation of national organizations that later joined the Social Watch.

The document entitled *Geneva Benchmark: 10 NGO Demands for the Geneva Social Summit* was supported by Social Watch member organizations and by many Development Caucus participants; its acceptance was therefore an important point during the UN General Assembly Special Session preparatory work. The document became a useful instrument for lobbying the delegations. It included proposals for mechanisms to control financial flows; outlined the need for well-defined targets to eradicate poverty, as well as deadlines for other reviews of commitments; promotion of development in Africa and "less-developed" countries; gender equality and equity; and promotion of an enabling international environment for social development.

NGO insistence, especially on the part of Social Watch, to maintain the focus on all ten Copenhagen commitments during the UN General Assembly Special Session was fundamental since some countries (particularly the US and Japan) attempted to restrict the agenda item (of the upcoming Summit negotiations) on "further initiatives" to the three original issues: poverty, unemployment, and social integration. This strategy reasserted the role of the UN General Assembly as the appropriate relevant space to discuss macroeconomic issues, and opposed the position of developed countries that would rather deal with those themes exclusively in institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, and the WTO, or even in those institutions from which Southern countries are totally excluded – the OECD and the G-8. Although the documents approved in Geneva in 2000 fell short when compared to the *Geneva Benchmark*, the inclusion of those themes in the Special Session agenda was an important gain for the NGOs.

The ongoing linkages between the national and international levels gave a specific political advantage to Social Watch's lobbying efforts throughout the WSSD+5 process. The social mobilization capacity of some of the national platforms and the dialogue channels opened up with their respective governments reflected positively on the intergovernmental process. For example, in the case of Brazil, the Philippines, Italy, and Canada, the presence of "watchers" in the official delegations to the PrepComs, and the Special Session itself, provided a useful space for dialogue with influential governments in their respective negotiating blocs (Canada, European Union and the G-7).

In some instances, this interaction between civil society and government helped to broaden the debate on Copenhagen commitments and the review of their implementation, with opportunities for controversial viewpoints both among different government levels and among civil society organizations. Several national and regional events were organized by Social Watch to discuss governments' positions and civil-society proposals for the Special Session. Regional gatherings and national seminars were held in Africa, Asia, Central America, Mexico, and Brazil.

Maintaining substantial interaction with several UN agencies, and with some multilateral institutions such as the OECD, is also part of the Social Watch strategy. This interaction was especially intense with UNDP, particularly during the elaboration of World Poverty Reports.

Some aspects of the relationships between Social Watch and other international civil society actors who participated in the Social Summit review process deserve to be highlighted. First, the Copenhagen follow-up attracted a relatively smaller number of civil society organizations. To a certain extent, the conference's very broad agenda did not facilitate the emergence of stakeholders who could clearly identify with the commitments. This characteristic

underscored the relevance of Social Watch participation in the process, but constrained the range of alliances and cooperation with other civil society actors. Among the closest partnerships with Social Watch, the partnerships with the Dawn network (especially on gender issues) and with the Eurostep and SAPRIN (Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Network) networks deserve special mention.

Another relevant actor with whom Social Watch had some degree of interaction – despite frequent conflicts resulting from divergent positions on some themes – was the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW). The divergence around the Antipoverty Convention defended by Social Watch and the Antipoverty Pact supported by ICSW was one of the main controversies between the two networks. However, there was no public debate. In fact, the UN environment, geared mainly to pressure governments, does not facilitate confrontation of opposing views between civil society organizations. In fact, it was as if the non-written principle of consensual decision-making was also in force among civil society organizations and networks.

One of the most striking signs of the visibility acquired by Social Watch in the Copenhagen review process was the invitation to Roberto Bissio, the Network's International Secretary, to address the official opening of the UN General Assembly Special Session in Geneva, as sole representative of civil society. On that occasion, Bissio expressed Social Watch's sharp criticism of *A Better World for All*, a document jointly signed by the UN, World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and released earlier that year by the Secretary-General. The impact was huge, as John Langmore, former Director of the UN Division for Social Policy and Development, later acknowledged. According to him, the immediate and emphatic Social Watch reaction against the report blocked the initiative from prospering.⁹

The way forward: Lessons

The Social Watch experience, particularly during the Copenhagen+5 process, illustrates some of the dilemmas for international civil society networks working within a changing international system whose future institutional framework has yet to be clearly defined. One is the difficulties of participating in official processes without losing the legitimacy built with its national platforms –

NGO networks often act as a kind of “civil diplomacy” blanket– but without any formal mandate to act as such. The legitimacy that they possess stems mainly from their linkages with processes and social struggles unfolding in the local and national spheres. Social Watch experience has been most innovative in relation to this aspect, especially when it seeks to incorporate the perspectives of both Northern and Southern countries.

However, to establish the bridge between the national and the international, and at the same time to monitor and lobby governments regarding their commitments, Social Watch has often had to walk on thin ice, combining pressure and political dialogue. This debate with government representatives on the qualities and shortcomings of national public policies requires new technical skills. Although present at the international level, this dilemma is felt especially strongly within national and local spheres.

Balancing sentiments of frustration and a sense of urgency

As the Copenhagen + 5 process demonstrated, although some of the points of the Geneva Benchmark could be found in the approved documents, the prevailing feeling among many participants at the conclusion of the General Assembly Special Session in Geneva was

⁹ Comment made during the launching of the Social Watch Report 2001 at the UN headquarters, New York, May 4, 2001.

frustration. In fact, lessons learned from the last two decades of UN-focused global advocacy efforts on the environment (from Rio to the World Summit) and women's rights (from Nairobi 85, Vienna 93, Cairo and Beijing) highlight the limited success achieved from increased access, improved content and sharper messages in significantly shifting political debates, paradigms and realities. The sense of frustration is quite overwhelming. Even UNDP reports refer to the 90s as the decade of broken promises, in relation to the lack of progress in fulfillment of the commitments signed by world governments in the so-called social cycle of UN conferences and summits. Though transnational civil society initiatives played a crucial role in linking global processes with local/national struggles, the overall picture is not very bright. One must recognize that the much-celebrated MDGs offer very little consolation after more than a decade of procrastination and systemic failure in addressing the growing global deficit in providing economic, social, cultural, political and environmental rights to most of the people on the planet.

In terms of multilateral processes, the most striking example of failure is seen in CSOs' inability to substantially influence the actual policies of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), particularly the World Bank. If one considers the amount of time, resources and energy dedicated over the last 20 years to open participatory spaces within those organizations, to influence their policies and policy papers, to engage (a new fashionable concept) with World Bank representatives and NGO liaison officers, the progress achieved is not so great after all. The overall structural adjustment framework is more alive than ever, in spite of tons of criticism received from everyone involved in the social development debate. It is definitely time to rethink what we define as "halls of power". And most important, how do we create alternatives avenues to express authentic civil society power?

Perhaps the time has come for NGOs to apply more pressure on the United Nations. However, this should be done with the simultaneous resumption of the debate on UN reform and its strengthening as an agency for global governance. Certainly Social Watch is one of the international networks best positioned to propose and stimulate this discussion, including its national implications. That remains one of the main challenges to be addressed over the next years.

Mobilizing for 2005 and beyond

Looking at these instructive experiences and recognizing how much the global context has changed, we can only conclude that change is not just about getting into the "halls of power" with a clear set of alternative ideas and proposals.¹⁰ It is not just getting a seat at the table with something powerful to say – although this is important – rather, it's a matter of changing the size and shape of the table, and ultimately who sits at the table. So, practically, this is a matter of balancing engagement in existing policy spaces with effective political efforts to reshape and claim new spaces of power. It is about critiquing and proposing policy alternatives while continuously building and communicating an alternative agenda and way of looking at the world. It is about creating enough continuous political pressure to democratize the process and the agenda so that whatever gains are achieved can be sustained and expanded. That is a deeply political task involving:

1. Sharper analysis and alternatives;
2. Broad agendas framing an alternative vision;
3. Compelling communication strategies tailored for different audiences, including the public and mainstream and popular forms;

¹⁰This is part of a ongoing "conversation" between Atila Roque and Lisa VeneKlasen .

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4. Greater dialogue, openness, and mutual constructive criticism amongst CSOs (networks, campaigns and individual organizations) in order to build a countervailing movement able to incorporate the diversity which exist in the world;
 5. Collective, organized citizen power capable of sustaining pressure on decision makers and powerbrokers to democratize the global economic policy process and agenda;
 6. Effective change strategies that combine and link research, citizen education, organizing, communication and engagement efforts.

The World Social Forum (WSF) process illustrates a clear evolution in terms of international civil activism and networking, offers a rich experience for learning using a model emphasizing through dialogue, mutual criticism and exchange amongst different civil society actors, including NGOs and social movements. However, The challenge of keeping the momentum of civil society engagement in international affairs and its connections with national policies, without losing its basic commitments to social change and human rights, is greater than ever. Maintaining a broader conversation about this is a challenge to everyone committed to democratic values at the national and global levels.

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