



TONY HILL

Civil Society and the Urban Agenda

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent expansion of more democratic forms of governance around the world, civil society, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and citizen's groups of all kinds have emerged in great number everywhere and have shown themselves to be a vital force in tackling some of the world's most pressing problems. Whether it is a mass lobby for a better deal on aid, trade and debt for developing countries, or the provision of services and material and moral support for the poorest communities and people, or self-organized citizen groups demanding their basic human rights, civil society has emerged as a key driver of progressive social, economic and political change in all regions of the world. As UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, observed in 2004, "The partnership between the UN and civil society is...not an option; it is a necessity."

There is a growing recognition that the battle to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, to eradicate poverty, to achieve gender equity and human rights for all, and to move towards environmentally sound patterns of production and consumption, will increasingly take place in the world's cities. Cities are prolific users of natural resources and generators of waste, pollution and the greenhouse gases that cause climate change; and with one in every three urban dwellers living in a slum, cities concentrate and manifest extensive poverty and exclusion in some of its most shocking forms. With demographers projecting that 60 per cent of the world's population will live in cities by 2030, up from around 30 per cent in the 1950s and 50 per cent today, it is not hard to imagine the momentous challenges that have to be faced in securing clean water supplies, waste and pollution management, decent housing, employment, urban transport and so on, all within a framework of law and respect for citizens' human rights.

In response to these daunting challenges, new directions in urban governance, policymaking and action are beginning to emerge, based upon greater recognition of the legitimate claims of different stakeholders involved in urban issues and problems. This movement is bringing together central governments, local authorities and municipalities, and civil society organizations and groups in joint efforts to address the most pressing problems. This is manifest in the tremendous upsurge of different forms of international, regional, national and local alliances, coalitions and partnerships focused on city issues around the world over the past 15 years. At the same time, there has been growing understanding and acceptance that civil society advocacy work on urban issues is a legitimate part of good governance and democratic politics, and can lead to more just, effective and efficient outcomes. Of course, this is not the case everywhere, and even where these new forms of participatory politics are taking root, these are still early days with much more work to be done if the dynamics and destinies of the world's cities are to be truly taken in hand. Yet the momentum is growing and will surely prove unstoppable in the long run.

As was underlined by the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on UNCivil Society Relations, the United Nations and its agencies, funds and programmes, such as UN-HABITAT, are at their most effective in promoting positive change around the world when they reach out to the diverse range of real actors on the ground and use their convening power to bring these actors together to negotiate and agree on the way forward. In many respects, the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, held in Istanbul in 1996, broke new ground in the vision and practice of partnership. In addressing the mounting challenges related to the huge population shifts in the world's cities, UN-HABITAT will need

to build upon and develop this legacy and deepen its relations and cooperation with a wide array of governmental and civil society organizations everywhere that are vital to its mission.

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