

Working Effectively within the UN – CoNGO Committees: Present and future

The meeting was initiated and organized by the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO) Vienna and United Nations Information Service (UNIS) Vienna.

CoNGO is an independent, international, not-for-profit membership association of nongovernmental organizations that facilitates the participation of NGOs in United Nations debates and decisions. CoNGO's roots go back to the role that NGOs played at the founding of the United Nations and the concept of "We the people," with which the UN Charter begins.

Since its founding in 1948, CoNGO ensures that NGO voices are heard throughout the international arena. CoNGO's major objectives highlight mobilizing NGOs to form a worldwide NGO forum on human rights, conceiving forms of NGO participation in UN conferences and its advocacy on behalf of NGOs at UN Headquarters.

UNIS Vienna as part of the network of UN Information Centres around the world, communicates the activities and concerns of the United Nations to the four countries it serves - Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia. It also supports the public information activities of Vienna-based UN organizations. NGOs profit from this communication service!

The following NGOs participated actively in the organization of the conference: CSW Vienna, NGO committee on Aging UN Vienna, NGO Committee on Peace Vienna, Young Generations Working Group, and Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs.

Martina Gredler, second vice president of CoNGO, welcomed the more than 100 participants from numerous NGOs. As an enthusiastic supporter of women's rights, she ensures that civil society has a strong voice in all their representative committees.

Director of UNIS Vienna Martin Nesirsky underlined UNIS support in the work of CoNGO: to make efficient the NGOs endeavors by disseminating the activities and challenges within the UN "realm." He urged CoNGO to communicate their concerns with UNIS and to support their "distribution" among the relevant UN community and agencies, respectively. Information and communication are the name of the game.

Protocol and NGO Liaison Service Omar Zevallos Orrillo appreciated the NGOs initiative for this conference in Vienna. In view of the wide range of activities to achieve the Beijing+25 goals cooperation is key, the continuous communication among the NGOs in Vienna will foster the efforts of each Committee. The United Nations firmly included in its Charter provisions for consultations and the development of relations with NGOs. The NGO liaison function was established at the United Nations Office at Vienna in 1979 thus facilitating the NGO participation in meetings held under the auspices of the United Nations. Such participation enables the views and concerns of

civil society to be reflected and addressed in the decisions of the United Nations intergovernmental process.

Ilona Graenitz, chair of the NGO Committee on Sustainable Development, underlined that the stand-alone Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality represent the prerequisite for Sustainable Development as well as peace and respect for the environment. The crisis in the world can only be solved, when there is open and respectful cooperation between the UN and the Member States, and NGOs and civil society. Her key message concentrated to urge Member States to formulate binding statements that present concrete propositions to achieve the SDGs. In particular, she raised topics like “how can cities contribute to SDGs,” “stop sealing the precious soil of our earth,” “keep water running, keep it reliably clear for all mankind.”

Jacqueline Stark, from the NGO Committee on Aging, pointed out not to lose aging out of focus, no matter whether older people represent either a relatively small or the majority group of the population. Most important, basically no discrimination in any respect. Elder abuse is common; it can be defined as “a single, or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person.” This global social issue affects the health and human rights of millions of older persons around the world. In summary, the challenge “Leave no one behind” includes elder people as well.

The Committee on Aging advocates on behalf of older persons’ rights before the UN Commissions, promotes further integration of ageing issues into UN policies and programs and encourages Member States to include aging needs and rights in their policies. The NGO Committee on Ageing at the United Nations Vienna was constituted in 1981 on the occasion of the first UN World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna in 1982. That conference presented a milestone in the attention of the public, given the various issues connected with ageing. Sister Committees are at the UN locations in Geneva and New York.

The Vienna NGO Committee in particular favors lifelong learning, including targeted educational activities for elder persons. Adequate measures need to be offered to strengthen elder persons position in order to keep them being part of the entire society!

Helga Kerschbaum, chair NGO Committee in Peace Vienna, mentioned the two relevant pillars to achieve PEACE: disarmament and peace education. Armament rises worldwide, including nuclear weapons. This development must change – mankind is longing for peace! Change is possible with adequate global peace education. Peace is fundamental, it is a mind setting. Start teaching children peace – not war! Children learn to apply peaceful actions; they are apt to accept non-aggressive skills and competences. Not only mothers are capable to educate, also fathers and grandparents are good teachers for children. Peace education goes well with gender equality.

NGO Committee on the Status of Women CSW Vienna, Laurie Richardson, commented energetically on the committee’s main purpose: to facilitate the activities of its member organizations in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Richardson urged the NGOs to sign the written statements regarding Beijing+25 to be presented at CSW64 New York – “Staying Vigilant, Making a Better World for All.” She reiterated on crucial aspects mentioned in the Beijing+25 statement: regarding CEDAW too few of the agreed standards have been achieved, women’s rights are still under attack, compared to Beijing+20

significant push backwards are obvious. Though some indicators of gender equality have improved, progress on structural issues at the root of gender inequality are insufficient and undermine to achieve SDG 5. Currently, no country in the world is on target to achieve gender equality by 2030. In particular, more women must be active in decision making, more women need to conscientiously fill in politics. Women need to be visualized in public, official and social processes and structure.

The CSW NGO helps sharing expertise to achieve the SDGs dealing with women's human rights. To point out to a few of CSW NGO's projects the speaker referred to UNIDO the industrial development organization and IAEA using nuclear science and technology for peaceful purposes and to facilitate the transfer of technology and knowledge in a sustainable manner to Member States. Gender equality represents the basis for sustainable economic and social development, however to achieve sustainable development more women need to hold publicly efficient positions.

NGO Committee on Drugs Chair Jamie Bridge vividly described the nature of the NGO CND. He underlined that the Committee comprises a wealth of quite different viewpoints, even contradictory opinions and experiences. The NGO's chair expressively stressed the importance to communicate among each other and to make every one's voice heard.

The NGO Committee on Drugs represents the vital link between civil society and UN agencies, promoting contacts and collaboration with the relevant international agencies, offices and fora. The Committee functions as liaison between NGOs, Civil Societies and UNODC, Vienna.

With the support of the Government of Canada the UNODC Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation Section is coordinating an informal consultative process with the aim of developing a handbook of best practices worldwide on this crucial issue.

Finally, the speaker drew the audience's attention to an upcoming event on stigmatization attitudes in January 2020 in order to learn more about the different points of view to this subject. It is known that illicit drug trade and usage is often caused by reasons other than addiction and abuse. In particular, women sell drugs to earn money to support their family. Poverty, lack of education, bad health conditions, discrimination, to name some of the important SDG, can lead to illegal narcotic drug use. Once this vicious circle is "closed" stigmatization by narcotic drug usage follows! On that background drugs relate to almost all SDGs, in particular, those SDGs where women are by majority affected.

The overall objective of the event is promoting non-stigmatized attitudes to ensure the availability of access to and delivery of health, care and social services for drug users. Again, with the support of the government of Canada, the UNODC is coordinating an informal consultative process to develop a handbook of best practices worldwide on these crucial issues.

The NGO Young Generations Working Group was founded only a few years ago. In view of the conference participants at UN Vienna conferences the NGOs in Vienna realized that "young people" should be more present and actively involved in the work with the UN agencies and commissions.

The NGO Young Generations Working Group functions as an important and future oriented “crosscutting” committee for basically all NGOs accredited by UN/ECOSOC with consultative Status. The overall objective of the NGO Young Generation is to raise awareness among other NGOs that the “young people’s voice is heard in the UN NGO community” – the future generation that has to “endure” the “failing” achievements towards the SDGs! And important is the inclusion of girls and boys.

According to Levi Bautista, president of CoNGO, the NGO committees need to talk about “young generations,” i.e. people up to 35 years of age. Mention of “youth” falls short to describe the “incoming” stakeholders of sustainable development.

The activities of the Working Group focus on Human Rights and Education of Human Rights. An event with children is planned for early 2020. Other activities include the cooperation with CSW Vienna and the submission of a statement at CSW64. The group participated at the Regional Meeting in Geneva as well as at the Conference on Sustainability in Clermont-Ferrand. Finally, the group works together with the CSW in Vienna in writing statements and organizing their events.

Ilona Graenitz, former CoNGO second vice president, presented a brief overview on the history of CoNGO in Vienna. CoNGO's major objective is to ensure the presence of NGOs in exchanges among the world's governments and UN agencies on issues of global concern. CoNGO has its offices and international secretariat in New York, Geneva and in Vienna. Marlene Parenzan was the first vice president in Vienna from 2000 – 2003, followed by Friedrich Gehart (2004-2007) and Ilona Graenitz (2008-2011). CoNGO had a small office on the premises of UN Vienna until 2010 and still has a result of the strong relationship to UNIS an NGO Lounge in C0331. The Vienna branch of CoNGO always had to fight for being recognized as an equal partner of the three premises of CoNGO and is proud of today’s achievements.

Levi Baustista, president of CoNGO, New York, felt it important to attend the various meetings of the Vienna NGOs (Meeting of the Alliance of NGOs on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Vienna based, CoNGO Committees). Baustista firmly defines NGOs for COnsultation, COllaboration, and COoperation under the umbrella of what is called CoNGO. Again, in view of the SDGs and the evaluation of progress according to Beijing+25 the continuous cross-cutting initiatives and activities of all NGOs dealing with SDG – in fact every single goal of the 17! – is indispensable. The three “CO..” reflect the core of the common work.

Cooperation includes all those NGOs that are accredited at the UN. However, the signature under written statements is ONLY valid from NGOs with UN/ECOSOC consultative status – according to the CoNGO Declaration.

The president drew an interesting picture of the atmosphere of cooperation prevailing among the CoNGO members in New York compared to Vienna. There - a wider range of different opinions and attitudes prevails, even “exclusiveness” and contradiction; here - more of consensual cooperation governs. In this context the president also suggested the foundation of additional NGO committees like on language, human sustainable settlements, sports – the latter as strong link for peace building. Finally, he envisions a NGO Committee on younger generations (instead of saying “youth”) also inspired by the presentation of the Young Generation Working Group!