

International Affairs Forum Interview

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By Anna Larnefeldt



IA-Forum speaks with **Aleksander Gabelic**, adviser to H.E. Jan Eliasson (President of the UN General Assembly) on UN relations with civil society.

IA-Forum: Tell us about your mission as adviser to Jan Eliasson

Aleksander Gabelic: My mission is to aid the General Assembly President in the work to strengthen UN relations with civil society at an institutional level. I do this by giving advice and support to Jan Eliasson and his Cabinet. The aim is to proceed with the work that the Cardoso report¹ started, to follow up on that report in a wide sense, meaning to make sure that attention is given to this issue, and that processes are initiated at different levels in order to further the overall goal to strengthen UN relations with civil society.

This is a part-time mission for me, and I travel to UN Headquarters in New York City every 5th or 6th week, for one week. During this week, I participate in the morning meetings of Eliasson's Cabinet and I meet with the secretary in the Cabinet who works with this issue full time. I have a lot of meetings with different NGO's, and with UN personnel. In short, my work really consists of a lot of discussions with relevant actors and networks. Then at the end of the week I have a meeting with Mr. Eliasson where I present some of the results of the discussions. I may also at any time write reports on certain issues that I feel should be brought to the President's attention, which I have done on some occasions. In addition to this, I have travelled elsewhere to visit relevant UN institutions (such as the World Bank in Washington D.C.) and Geneva, and also participated in network meetings in, for example, Geneva.

¹ *We the peoples: civil society, the United Nations and global governance: Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations – Civil Society Relations 2003*. Official UN document published at <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N04/376/41/PDF/N0437641.pdf?OpenElement>

IA-Forum: What do you feel have been the biggest problems or obstacles in your work?

AG: This issue clearly has a limited role in the work of the UN as well as in the work of the General Assembly President. Questions of UN reform such as the creation of the Peace-Building Commission and the Human Rights Council have been of much higher priority, and the President and other actors have worked really hard on this, which of course has meant that they have been very busy. Although there have been some improvements, comprehensive changes in UN-civil society relations are lagging behind. This is foremost a question of knowledge and priorities. The knowledge is not always there, and this has a lot to do with priorities. Also, this issue is not without controversy, and the goals are not necessarily self-evident. There are member states which are less positive or even negative towards increasing openness and developing UN-civil society relations and letting civil society gain more influence.

IA-forum: What do you feel have been the greatest successes in your work?

AG: We have had several successful meetings between the UN and NGO's. The GA President had a meeting with NGO representatives in New York in December, and there were two meetings in Geneva where the ongoing work on UN reform was presented and feedback and opinions were given on civil society. Meetings have also been arranged with UN co-chairs for reforms. These meetings have been very appreciated and viewed as successful.

Although comprehensive changes are absent, one should not forget that other UN reform issues are also issues that are important for civil society, and components of civil society have been involved in these reform processes as well. Many NGO's have been very active in lobbying, and have had an influence in the reform process, and many are very satisfied with the creation of the Human Rights Council.

IA-Forum: Your mission is to follow up the result of the Cardoso panel's proposal on strengthened relations between the United Nations and civil society, have you seen any progress after this report? Are these issues given attention within the UN?

AG: These issues have not been given much attention. This is due to several circumstances, including the timing of the publishing of the report in September 2001. Other important reform reports were given much more attention before the world summit and it was a failure in this regard. The fact that the Cardoso proposals were not included or mentioned in the outcome document of the High-Level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly in September 2005 speaks for itself. There has been a focus on certain factual matters, and some proposals. This is a complex issue and it is hard to get a grip on it. I do not want to say that the Cardoso report is dead, it still has an influence, but it is limited.

I want to emphasise that not only member states but also NGO's have a responsibility in this process. They need to improve their work and co-operation. There is a need to go beyond the narrow focuses on each organisation's focus issue, look at more general aspects and comprehensive improvements, and develop forms of co-operation, because it is possible. Well established lobby organisations have a responsibility here.

Despite the limited impact of the Cardoso report so far, it has not been in vain, and one has to give credit to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who took this initiative. It was an important step and it was a brave step, because it is not very popular among all member states.

IA-Forum: Have there been any concrete improvements or changes?

AG: The creation of the Human Rights Council and civil society's influence and participation in this process have shown that the status of civil society is strong and has been maintained. The establishment of the Peace-Building Commission opens up for new opportunities for civil society to stay involved, co-operate and create new networks, and maintain an influence. This is an opportunity that should not be missed. What I would like to see is a resolution that confirms the role of civil society in the UN.

IA-Forum: One area in which NGO's have had a large influence is aid and refugee assistance. However, this area has been criticised for lack of organisation. How can civil society improve in this area?

AG: This is an area that will be affected by the creation of the Peace-Building Commission. It is very important for civil society to be involved as the mandate and work of this Commission evolves. It opens up for new forms of co-operation and participation. NGO's need to become better at co-ordinating efforts. As I mentioned before – there is a need to look beyond the narrow interests of the organisation and its focus issue, and see what function it has or can have in a larger context.

IA-Forum: Civil society has had a large influence in certain areas, but very little influence in, for example, security issues. Do you have any hope, or have you seen any signs, that this will change?

AG: There is a growing tendency to invite representatives of civil society to hearings, and on occasions representatives have even been invited to the UN Security Council, something that was unthinkable not so long ago. So there have definitely been improvements. The new Peace-Building Commission is meant to serve as a bridge between the Security Council and ECOSOC. So there are signs that the influence and participation of civil society in the UN will not be as limited to ECOSOC as it has been before.

Security will of course continue to be an issue where it is harder for civil society to have a strong role than in, for example, refugee

assistance. However, we should not forget that this is not a separate issue. As Kofi Annan emphasised in his report *In Larger Freedom*: development, human rights and security are inextricably linked. They are all important, and involvement in one should create openings for involvement in the others. Although there is resistance against civil society involvement, we live in a globalised world with good possibilities for co-operation. Another positive development is the movement away from the presupposition of the sovereignty of the state, and of states as the only actors in international relations. The idea of Responsibility to Protect is one example of this.

IA-Forum: Many talk about how important it is to engage civil society and to develop relations between the UN and civil society in order to make the UN more democratic. Can there also be a democratic problem in the influence of NGO's?

AG: Civil society needs to reform itself in a democratic context. There is a need for improved democratic structures within civil society and within organisations. The United Nations' accreditation system could be reformed as well, and moved from ECOSOC to the UN General Assembly.

IA-Forum: In the past, certain organisations have been excluded from the UN because certain states have been afraid of their reviews, have there been any improvements in this area?

AG: Certain member states may oppose certain organisations and try to limit their influence, especially in areas such as HIV-AIDS and human rights. However, such acts are usually heavily criticised and bring more attention to these states, something they want to avoid.

IA-Forum: How do you see future of UN relations with civil society?

Aleksander Gabelic: I am positive. I am hoping for more actors who are prepared to help to further this process, and for new initiatives. An important goal as well as a beginning is a UN decision in the form of resolution that acknowledges the role of civil society in the UN and identifies the main points where work is needed. It may be somewhat of a repetition, but a well needed one.

IA-Forum: Thank you very much.

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