

# International Forums for Addressing Social Inclusion and Social Equity Issues

MJ Peterson

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## Intergovernmental Discussion Forums.

### Global intergovernmental organizations.

The United Nations has been the primary forum for discussion of social inclusion at the global level since 1945. The UN Charter lists promoting "fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women" and "social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom" in the statement of goals for the organization.<sup>1</sup> Most UN deliberation about social inclusion and social equity occurs in discussions of human rights, social issues, and economic development. Each of these issues tends to be addressed primarily in a different set of UN bodies.

*For human rights:* General Assembly Third Committee, UN Human Rights Council, the "Treaty Committees" monitoring government efforts to implement seven multilateral human rights treaties developed under UN auspices, UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the International Labor Organization.<sup>2</sup>

*For social issues:* General Assembly Third Committee, General Assembly Second Committee, Economic and Social Council, UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Children's Fund (UNICEF),<sup>3</sup> International Labor Organization.

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<sup>1</sup> Complete text available at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/index.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights activist and scholar Julie A. Mertius provides a good introduction to the UN bodies and how individuals and NGOs can engage them in *The United Nations and Human Rights: A Guide for a New Era*. London: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF's acronym derives from its original name, UN International Children's Emergency Fund.

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The UN also sponsors periodic global conferences on Women, Population, and Aging. The 1995 World Summit on Social Development, the 2000 Millennium Summit, and the 2005 "Millennium plus 5" Summit also addressed social issues.

For many years United Nations discussion of social equity in the development context was rather vague, consisting primarily of exhortations to reduce poverty. Adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 broke with that pattern: the MDGs were stated in quantitatively verifiable terms, such as reducing by half the proportion of people without regular access to safe drinking water and reducing the mortality rate of children under 5 by two-thirds.<sup>4</sup>

UN discussions of social inclusion and social equity in developed countries were inhibited during the Cold War by the strongly contrasting visions of priority in realization of goals presented by East and West. Both claimed to be the more democratic and life-enhancing system but saw the road to progress in very different terms. Debate was particularly stark between the USSR, which saw socialist revolution and suppression of former exploiters as key to progress, and the USA, which saw enlarging political inclusion and freedom as key to further social inclusion and social equity. With the end of the Cold War, the social democratic traditions of Western Europe, in which both political and social inclusion and equity were seen as an indivisible whole, came to the fore. This change was registered in the 1995 World Summit on Social Development and in the process of replacing the older Human Rights Commission reporting to the Economic and Social Council with the Human Rights Council reporting directly to the General Assembly.

Though their primary missions do not include dealing with social issues, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have not been able to ignore them. The inspiration for IMF and WTO attention has come mainly from outside: from demands by transnational NGOs, groups in developing countries, and social movements now coalescing into a broad anti-globalization movement that the organization pay greater attention to the social impact of lending programs that require governments to cut deficits through program retrenchment and/or privatization of state-owned enterprises (IMF) or of rules regarding trade in goods and services (WTO). The inspiration for World Bank attention has been partly internal – presidents and managers sensitive to social issues – and external – the same combination of transnational NGOs and social movements.

Each of the three deals with social equity concerns in different ways. The WTO operates at two levels – establishment of general rules for government treatment of imported goods and services and settlement of disputes between member states over application (or more accurately violation) of the rules. Particular trade disputes can have significant social dimensions: a ruling that a country has properly invoked the medical emergency clause allows it to affect drug prices by imposing compulsory licensing on a patent holder so local production of a patented drug may proceed, an action that typically entails lower than market-rate royalty payments. In general, however, the ministerial meetings where new rules or amendments to existing rules are discussed provide the forum for taking up social concerns. World Bank lending goes mainly to projects – construction of physical infrastructure or production facilities – that have a direct impact on people living in the area. Several World Bank financed dam or other infrastructure projects became extremely controversial in the 1990s because of their negative social effects. Strong pressures

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<sup>4</sup> In UN General Assembly Resolution A/55/2 of 8 September 2000. The full statement of goals is available at <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

from NGOs and social movements, backed by threats from the US Congress to withhold contributions to replenishment of lending funds, led the World Bank to adopt a number of policies regarding the handling of social issues and to create an Inspection Panel empowered to receive and investigate complaints from private individuals, groups, and organizations that a World Bank-financed project was being accomplished in ways that violate a policy. The IMF was slower to accommodate social issues, and even today maintains less direct interaction with NGOs and other non-governmental groups than the World Bank.

#### Regional intergovernmental organizations.

The extent to which regional intergovernmental organizations address social issues depends on what the governments of member states wish to discuss. This varies considerably in the different parts of the world.

Consistent with government and popular attitudes in the member states, concern with social issues is very strong in the European Union. The EU has a relatively strong bureaucracy since it is intended to coordinate and manage an ongoing regional integration effort having the ultimate goal of merging the member states into a larger political entity. One segment of this bureaucracy, the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities is specifically charged with developing regulations on social issues and monitoring member state compliance with EU Treaties, Directives, and Regulations addressing social issues.<sup>5</sup> The EU has increasingly addressed human rights issues, and in 2000 the EU Council and Parliament agreed on the text of a Charter of Fundamental Rights<sup>6</sup> to be included as Part II of the proposed treaty establishing a constitution for Europe which has not yet been adopted. The EU does not have distinct human rights bodies; the European Court of Human Rights and the European Commissioner for Human Rights are maintained by the Council of Europe, which was founded earlier than the EU (1949 rather than 1958) and until recently had a larger membership.<sup>7</sup>

The transition from Organization of African Unity (OAU) to African Union (AU) in 1999-2003 marked adoption of greater regional integration as an explicit goal, but that project has not yet advanced very far. The major decisions are still made in the Meetings of Heads of State and Government ("African summits"), but the Union has added an 8-member Commission to develop programs and carry out Summit decisions. As in the European Union, each member of the regional commission has charge of a defined set of issues. One member's mandate covers Social Affairs (defined as including health, children, drug control, population, migration, labor & employment, plus sports & culture), the member in charge of Human Resources, Science, and Technology deals with education and youth questions, and another's mandate covers Rural Economy and Agriculture. To develop greater collaboration with civil society, the AU has also established an advisory Economic, Social and Cultural Council with 150 members drawn professional associations, social groups, and NGOs in various African countries.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See its web page at <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=656>

<sup>6</sup> Text available at [http://ec.europa.eu/justice\\_home/unit/charte/index\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/unit/charte/index_en.html) (accessed 13 August 2009).

<sup>7</sup> The Court's website is at <http://www.echr.coe.int/echr/> and the Commissioner's at [http://www.coe.int/t/commissioner/default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/commissioner/default_en.asp) (accessed on 13 August 2009).

<sup>8</sup> See information at [www.africa-union.org](http://www.africa-union.org).

Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have also moved from consultations to higher levels of joint activity intended to deepen connections among their societies after creation of the ASEAN Free Trade Area in 1992.<sup>9</sup> Meetings of Heads of State and Government (“ASEAN Summits”) remain the primary decision-making body, but they have been supplemented by more frequent meetings of cabinet members in charge of various sectors of national administration. These include Health, Labor, Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation, Social Welfare, and Youth. ASEAN continues its traditions of operating by consensus and avoiding topics likely to intrude too much on any member’s internal affairs, but the ministerial meetings widen the range of discussions beyond the traditional political and economic affairs. Formal ASEAN consultations with NGOs are limited to professional and business organizations in major economic sectors.

The Organization of American States remains a forum for consultation and coordination among members;<sup>10</sup> Western Hemisphere regional integration projects involve various groupings of members. The OAS maintains the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights<sup>11</sup> and related Inter-American Court of Human Rights. OAS members are currently working on a new Social Charter of the Americas that will emphasize eradication of extreme poverty. Social issues have received more sustained attention since establishment of the Inter-American Council for Integral Development and the OAS secretariat’s related Executive Secretariat for Integral Development.<sup>12</sup> The OAS does not have a separate body for NGOs, but its Committee on Inter-American Summit Management and Civil Society Participation has been developing procedures for consultations in recent years.

### Other Intergovernmental Organizations

The 30 industrial states belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) use its secretariat to assemble data and studies on a wide variety of issues related to government administration and macroeconomic management. OECD committees, working groups, and forums then bring together high government officials or officials and others to discuss experiences and suggest best practices. Recent considerations of social issues include a Forum on “Sickness, Disability and Work: Addressing Policy Challenges in OECD Countries” (Stockholm, 14-15 May 2009) where employment and social affairs ministers from 15 OECD countries discussed integrating sickness and disability policies into their wider efforts to deal with the global economic downturn and a High-Level Conference on Boosting Jobs and Incomes” (Toronto, 15-16 June 2006) where heads of government ministries, business leaders, academics and union representatives to consider the policy lessons to be drawn from an assessment of the OECD Jobs Strategy.

### **Other forums.**

#### Elite conversations.

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<sup>9</sup> Information on ASEAN available at [www.aseansec.org](http://www.aseansec.org)

<sup>10</sup> See [www.oas.org](http://www.oas.org).

<sup>11</sup> Its webpage is <http://www.cidh.oas.org/DefaultE.htm> (accessed 13 August 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Its webpage is <http://portal.oas.org/Default.aspx?tabid=293&language=en-US> (accessed 13 August 2009)

The privately organized World Economic Forum is the best-known forum for transnational discussion among members of economic elites. It began as a gathering of top executives from large European firms then expanded to include heads of firms in other parts of the world. Speeches by heads of government and other notables, presentations by academic experts, and conversations among members at its annual meetings in Davos, Switzerland include discussions of social concerns. It now supports a set of global agenda councils bringing together experts on various issues to identify trends, identify knowledge gaps, and suggest action for firms and a set of communities bringing leaders of labor unions, NGOs, religious establishments, women's groups, and others into discussions with Forum members.<sup>13</sup>

### Transnational policy advocacy coalitions.

Transnational advocacy coalitions involve loose cooperation among transnational and national NGOs, policy experts, and others who share a concern and agree on the broad contours of effective policies for addressing it. Human rights and environmental advocacy coalitions typically address issues on which international agreements lay out terms of policy coordination and seek either to pressure governments into carrying out their existing commitments or to encourage governments to make additional commitments.<sup>14</sup> Others, like the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, address issues on which international agreements are vague or nonexistent and press for developing new agreements that will endorse the policy they advocate.<sup>15</sup> Transnational advocacy coalitions employ various combinations of direct discussions with government officials, participation in IGO-sponsored forums, promotion of public petition or letter-writing campaigns to bring citizen pressure to bear on governments, media exposure, and nonviolent protests to advance their views.

### Transnational social movements.

Transnational social movements draw together like-minded persons and groups from two or more countries. They tend to be even more loosely organized than transnational advocacy coalition, though the labor movement did spawn Marxist First and Second International, and a loose network of anarcho-syndicalist unions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and several competing organizations including the Socialist International, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the World Federation of Trade Unions, the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions, and the Trotskyite Fourth International in second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, the World Social Forum, named and organized as a counter to the World Economic Forum, has gone beyond holding a single annual meeting (initially in Puerto Alegre, Brazil) to becoming the hub of a global network of regional and local WSF affiliates providing meetings where, as their main page puts it, "social movements, networks, NGOs and other civil society organizations opposed to neo-liberalism and a world dominated by capital or by any form of imperialism" can assemble to exchange ideas and encouragement, and organize together.<sup>16</sup> Though all anti-globalization activists can

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<sup>13</sup> It maintains a website at [www.weforum.org](http://www.weforum.org) (accessed 13 August 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Price, "Reversing the gun sights: Civil society targets landmines," *International Organization* 52(3): (summer 1998).

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id\\_menu=19&cd\\_language=2](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=19&cd_language=2) (accessed 13 August 2009).

rally around the WSF's broad slogan "another world is possible," they have trouble uniting on a more detailed program because some seek to create or recreate a more active state administration that will use government power to subordinate markets to democratically-chosen social goals while others regard governments with equal suspicion and seek a radical decentralization of politics and localization of social life. Transnational social movements tend to engage primarily in "contentious politics" – with extensive use of protests and civil disobedience to make their points,<sup>17</sup> though the election of leftist-populist presidents in several Latin American countries have given the anti-globalization movement an opening into elite circles that it did not enjoy earlier.<sup>18</sup>

### Questions for Consideration or Discussion

1. Most advocates of social equity and social inclusion regard the EU as much stronger on these issues than either the UN or other regional organizations. Why is this the case?
2. How do the transnational advocacy coalitions and transnational social movements interested in social equity and social inclusion try to affect decisions?

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Tilly, and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Evo Morales of Bolivia, Lius Inacio Lula Silva of Brazil, Rafael Correa of Ecuador, Fernando Lugo of Paraguay, and Hugo Chavez of Venezuela attended the January 2009 WSF meeting.