



The Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship  
With the United Nations (CONGO)

Summary Report of the  
**NGO FORUM to the  
ECOSOC High-Level Segment  
on  
“Promoting an integrated approach to rural development  
in developing countries for poverty eradication and  
sustainable development”**

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# Narrative Report

## 1. Background and Objectives

The Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO) has been asked by the ECOSOC Secretariat to organize for the third consecutive year an NGO Forum preceding the ECOSOC High-Level Segment (HLS). The theme of the Forum, as well as the one of the HLS, was "Promoting an integrated approach to rural development in developing countries for poverty eradication and sustainable development". The Forum took place in the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2003.

The purpose of the Forum was to bring to the attention of the HLS the recommendations of NGOs for input into the debate and the Ministerial Declaration. Thanks to the financial support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), CONGO has been able to fund the participation of 17 NGOs representatives from developing countries – 8 from Africa, 8 from Asia and 1 from Latin America. Altogether, the Forum gathered around 100 participants among which many were members of NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC - and hence were already used to the functioning of the UN mechanisms and aware of the advocacy activity of NGOs. However, many represented NGOs without consultative status and no previous UN exposure. To fill the gap it is CONGO's mandate to both strengthen UN - NGOs relations and to reach out to the NGO community in the regions in order to bring their concerns back to the main UN fora.

The program was clustered around five thematic subjects focusing on the rural areas: poverty eradication; agricultural development and food security; the promotion of health, water and sanitation; participation and decentralization; the promotion of women and gender equality. Speakers had been selected to provide as far as possible geographical and gender balance and, obviously, on the basis of their experience/relevance and working in rural development.

The panelists had been asked to present concrete recommendations that were then summed up by the general rapporteur of the session, Cyril Ritchie. These recommendations were subsequently developed into a declaration that the CONGO President, Renate Bloem, had the privilege to present to the ECOSOC HLS on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. The declaration was very well received by the audience which – it is worth stressing - applauded the concerns and aspirations of NGOs.

The Forum has been evaluated by participants through the means of an evaluation questionnaire. The result of this evaluation can be found at page 20.

## 2. Narrative of Proceedings

Introductory and welcome statements were made by:

- **Renate Bloem**, President of CONGO, who reminded participants of the importance and opportunity to become active partners in the HLS debate through recommendations reflecting their experience on the ground.
- **Rolph Van der Hoeven**, Technical Manager of the ILO World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, who gave a comprehensive overview of the work of the Commission in relation to rural development challenges.
- **Hanifa Mezoui**, Chief NGO Section, DESA, New York, who underscored the importance of NGO participation in the ECOSOC HLS debate and referred also to other Segments of the ECOSOC Substantive Session to which NGOs could contribute
- **Ricardo Espinosa**, Attaché of the NGO Liaison UN Office in Geneva, who expressed contentment of the choice of this year's ECOSOC HLS theme, since rural development had too often been neglected to the profit of urban development during the last decade. He challenged NGOs to remind governments of their commitments.
- **Nikhil Seth**, Office of the Under-Secretary General/DESA, who spoke about the UN architecture, relations and relevance between General Assembly, ECOSOC, subsidiary bodies and civil society concerning an integrated approach to rural development.

Then the floor was passed to the first panel.

### 2.1 Poverty Eradication: the Critical Role of Rural Development

Speakers:

- Marie-Odile Novert, ATD Quart Monde, France
- Isagani Serrano, Social Watch, Philippines
- Harriet Busingye, Uganda Land Alliance, Uganda
- Salma Galal, Rural Development and Environment, Egypt,
- Pilar Lara/Jumana Tard, Foundation for the Social Promotion of Culture, Spain
- Moderator: Hamish Jenkins, Non Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS)

Half of the world's population lives in rural areas. Hence it is vital to focus on rural development to achieve the aim of eradicating poverty. **Isagani Serrano**, from Social Watch Philippines, focused on the importance of correcting past injustices and present misconceptions. He pointed out both the pros and cons of liberalization and globalization, stressing that the issue is not simply a dichotomy between regulation and liberalization but it is rather to know when it is desirable to regulate and when it is desirable to liberalize.

The answer to these questions, said Mr. Serrano, lies in the dialogue with the poor and in their participation in policy guiding. The poor might not have the answers to poverty eradication, but they are the ones who know best the experience of poverty. National budgets need to be adjusted to allow for a change in the bias that currently exists between rural and urban subsidies and budgets. More must be done to end the "double whammy", as Mr Serrano called it, facing rural producers - high production costs due to poor infrastructure and

falling commodity prices. He recommended that international agendas be localised and the value of a sustained partnership with the rural poor be recognised as the most effective way to proceed in rural development.

**Harriet Busingye**, from the Uganda Land Alliance, also stressed the importance of a partnership with the rural poor. Her NGO observed that 85% of the Ugandan population is engaged in rural agriculture. Alongside a government initiative, they carried out a grassroots consultation to find out what poor people on the ground actually need and to define what poverty actually entails. The rural poor defined poverty a.o. in terms of powerlessness, lack of education, social exclusion, gender inequality, land rights and poor infrastructure. Recommendations from this consultation should point towards an holistic approach which focuses on rights and the provision of needs identified by the rural poor themselves. Land rights was a central issue, and Ms. Busingye recommended that steps be taken to ensure equal rights to land ownership, especially for women, to increase education on land rights and to provide legal aid to obtain these rights within an established legal framework.

Community participation and consultation was also emphasised by **Marie Odile Novert** of ATD Quart Monde, an NGO that works in rural development in the South. To eliminate poverty the donors, international institutions, NGOs and other actors need to build a partnership with the poor. Criteria of participation must be established for the donors of a project, so that a partnership is initiated from the early stages. Education is key, said Ms. Novert, in facilitating both access and support for the rural poor to development initiatives. Consultation is equally important in teaching development experts what the needs of the rural poor are, as is community participation using local social frameworks and knowledge.

Community consultation and participation is indispensable for rural development. This clear message was driven home by **Pilar Lara** and **Jumana Tard** representing the Foundation for the Social Promotion of Culture (FSPC). A holistic vision must be adopted which takes into consideration judicial, infrastructural, educational and political issues. Moreover the agreement and unity of all the ones involved in the management of development initiatives and policies, from the private sector to financing bodies to civil society, must be obtained. The partnership of NGOs that work for the same ends is a powerful force, and the FSPC has created READI, a network of 38 NGOs working in rural development in the Mediterranean region. This network has successfully implemented many sustainable projects in partnerships with local communities.

The force of partnership was emphasised in a different way by **Salma Galal**, talking about her experience with rural development in Egypt. Rural Development and Environment took a highly participatory approach to the question of rural development around Cairo. The community identified its needs and organised itself in order to fully participate in the initiative and have ownership of the project. The initiative involved a highly successful tripartite partnership between the community, the NGO and the government, in a model which Ms. Galal hopes could be replicated in other rural development initiatives.

## Agricultural Development and Food Security in the Rural Areas

Speakers:

- Bruce Moore, Coordinator of the International Land Coalition
- Jun Saturnino Borrás, Institute of Social Studies, the Netherlands
- Sofia Monsalve, FIAN International
- Clive Lightfoot, Director, International Farming System Association (IFSA)
- Teclaire Ntomb, Présidente du Groupe d'initiatives communes des paysannes de Bogso, Cameroun
- Moderator: Peter Prove, Lutheran World Federation

The first speaker of the panel was **Bruce Moore**, coordinator of the International Land Coalition, an alliance to forge property rights for the rural poor. Mr. Moore highlighted the close relationship between 'hunger' and landlessness: of the 900 million people classified as 'hungry', 350 million are landless. Securing access to land for the rural poor and defining their land rights is a key step in tackling poverty. It is a fact that small land holders are proportionally more productive than large ones. Thus the redistribution of land would not only alleviate hunger suffered by the landless but also aid the national economy, both in terms of increased productivity and employment.

The redistribution of land also impacts on social justice and democracy: if traditions of large land holders are kept, an unequal power distribution will be maintained which is unfavourable to both democracy and social justice. Moreover, international institutions must aim to go beyond getting the language of endless rights declarations and aim for accountability instead. The way large and powerful institutions are run must be examined, because often there is a clear link between those in power, the landed, the wealthy and the control of the policy making process. This has often hindered the land redistribution process and hence the creation of adequate social justice.

**Clive Lightfoot**, Director of IFSA, suggested that problems of poor policy direction and accountability can be remedied by strong action by NGOs and the enforcement of ministerial declarations. Specifically he recommended that civil society sets up the mechanism to keep rural development on the agenda and keep initiatives rolling. This is vital in order to avoid the failure that similar initiatives met 25 years ago. Furthermore, agreed instruments of civil society must be set up and revitalised. Who should take responsibility for this? The very people who are present at this conference and all others who are involved in civil society, said Mr. Lightfoot. National Councils on Sustainable Development made up of NGOs should be established to advise government policy. Mr Lightfoot was adamant that these declarations don't fall by the way side as they have done in the past; in order to ensure this we must set a virtuous cycle of collaboration, linking grassroots action to policy formulation and debate. The key thing to come out of any declaration of this forum must be civil society's commitment to action and change.

**Jun Saturnino Borrás**, from the Institute of Social Studies, presented a critique of market led agrarian reforms (MLAR). Recognising that land is a key resource for the rural poor, Mr. Borrás stated that land reform is inextricably tied up with land redistribution to ensure social justice and that this redistribution involves a shift from rich to poor and landed to landless. The World Bank's

approach to land reform however is market led, which is blind to social justice and to the needs of the rural poor. The MLAR are voluntary and ensure that landowners receive 100% of the market value of their land, fully paid by the buyer. These reforms have been implemented in a privatised and decentralised manner, which has resulted in a lack of any real distribution. Certainly there has been no transfer of land from landed to landless because of the historical and apolitical nature of the reforms. Land reform is at the heart of the issue of social justice, which markets cannot possibly account for. To change this trend, Mr. Borrás recommended strengthening the co-operation between rural social movements and state institutions. His strongest recommendations were for a rights-based approach that creates a redistributive policy which is explicitly pro-poor.

This rights-based approach to rural development was also championed by **Sofia Monsalve** from FIAN International. The approach of FIAN is grounded in the universal human right to feed oneself, enshrined in the 1948 declaration. All too often, legal obligations have been ignored or not enforced after major conferences. All states have obligations if they have ratified the main human rights instruments. If we are to oblige states to act in accordance with these, it is first necessary to give an authoritative definition of what rights entail. In this way, a human rights approach can be the best way to ensure accountability, by checking actions against obligations. Human rights criteria can set and direct policy and make state actions subject to legal proceedings and public scrutiny. In order to fulfil the right of people to feed themselves, strong redistributive land reforms are needed. Furthermore, the right to feed oneself is applicable to all, including women, and so it can be used as a focus for women's rights to land ownership. Liberalisation and market reforms must be checked when it is clear that they will adversely affect social justice.

The final speaker of the panel was **Teclaire Ntomb**, President of the "Groupe d'Initiatives Communes des Paysannes de Bogso" in Cameroun. She eloquently told of her organisation's grassroots experience of combating hunger through agrarian reforms. Taking the indigenous concept of 'Youm', which means solidarity, her organisation concentrates on local skills and knowledge to provide a sustainable solution to perennial problems of food and money shortages. By setting up local groups, in which each member is responsible for his or her own role, the Groupe d'Initiatives Communes created different recipes for manioc to increase its dietary value. By assisting in its cultivation and sale, the organization also helps to generate income, which in turn helps to pay for the children's schooling. The new ways manioc is used also brought about social change in that manioc is no longer regarded as a poor person's or woman's food. Instead it has become a source of nutrition and income. Ms. Ntomb's recommendations were that rural development should focus on local sensibilities and traditions and strongly encourage solidarity.

## 2.2 The Promotion of Health, Water and Sanitation in the Rural Areas

Speakers:

- Dr. Mohammed Ali Barzgar, People's Health Movement, Iran
- Jean-Pierre Ouedraogo, Ligue des Consommateurs du Burkina Faso
- Joanna Kock, Associated County Women of the World, Switzerland

- Manoj Kurian, World Council of Churches, Executive Programme Health and Healing
- Moderator: Bineta Diop, Femme Africa Solidarité

**Dr. Mohammed Ali Barzgar** opened this session by stating: *“meeting the basic minimum needs of the people is the pre-requisite for rural development”*. He stressed that a new vision of development is needed, one that allows people’s initiatives and participation. He described this vision as a *bottom-up planning and integrated approach* versus a *top-down planning approach*. This vision implies community involvement, inter-sectoral collaboration and decentralization. People have to be the actors/implementers of development and not mere recipients, whereas government officials have to be the facilitators. Additionally, the health goals have to be understood as people’s goal. According to the speaker development has to be indigenous. He then pointed out the different roots of ill health and their corresponding intervention strategy. This includes improved income and employment opportunities at grass- root levels, functional literacy campaign especially for women, strengthening educational sectors through intersectoral collaboration, strengthening of small industries, intersectoral micro project development in rural areas, increased awareness of people and healthy cities and villages.

**Jean Pierre Ouedraogo** underlined the importance of acting as soon as possible in order to save people that are not yet living in high poverty. His presentation addressed the issue of the cotton industry. The mechanisation of the cotton production coupled with huge cotton subsidies (granted by the World Bank and the IMF) have considerably impoverished the rural /agricultural economy and reduced peasant’s income earnings from agriculture. Mr. Ouedraogo pointed out that increasing rural poverty inevitably leads to an increase in ill health. Mr Ouedraogo said that a paper has been submitted to the WTO (16 June 2003) asking for the elimination of the cotton subsidies and immediate measures of compensation. He asked for the ECOSOC HLS support and said that his paper will be re-submitted in September 2003 at the WTO Fifth Ministerial Conference in Cancun, Mexico.

**Joanna Koch** recalled some miscellaneous facts on water and sanitation: worldwide, 2.4 billion people lack access to basic sanitation and 1.2 billion (one in 5) lack safe drinking water. She stressed that health, water and sanitation are intermixed - impossible to have one without the other – and hence access to water must include access to sanitation. By installing sanitation systems, water contamination is avoided and considerable improvements in health are achieved. She noticed that the community workers do not generally have the technical knowledge and it is thus necessary to work in close partnership with experts, preferably from the government. She said that special attention must be given to storage methods: 1) tanks must be placed high enough to function properly 2) they need to be cleaned frequently 3) stored water must be kept clean 4) the pump should have 50 m protective zone, so that the ground water does not be contaminated. She stressed that in many developing countries women and children in rural areas spend much of their time collecting water. The Associated Country Women of the World runs projects that aim to alleviate rural poverty by focusing on water, irrigation, sanitation, health and environment. She finally pointed out some recommendations:

1. Access to health, sanitation and water has to be considered holistically; one cannot be achieved without the other;
2. Access to too much water can have a devastating effect on community health and productivity and projects have to safeguard against this;
3. Basic hygiene education and training must be an integral part of any project;
4. All projects must be community-owned and community-decided but partnered by experts and the government;
5. Women must have the right and not just the role to be part in the decision making process and there must be water access structures that women can control and maintain;
6. Women living in mountain regions, surviving in areas of conflict and in extreme hard physical conditions and with poor access to health care must be supported: they are the ones who preserve fragile mountain ecosystems for the benefit of mankind;
7. Mountain regions must be given particular concern to, remembering our universal dependence on their rich reserves of water, biodiversity and minerals;
8. Governments should encourage and promote local community initiatives and give their ongoing support to such groups by developing policies and programmes that help identify opportunities to improve the health status of communities;
9. Research and studies which underline the cost savings and economic benefits of improved community health and productivity must be supported;
10. Small scale water projects – boreholes, drilling, use of groundwater – must be promoted rather than the construction of large scale dams whose benefits are often not sustainable and do not conform to local situations.

**Manoj Kurian**, highlighted that urban systems are being overloaded as opposed to the lack of facilities in rural areas and stressed that it is urgent to make of rural areas better places, most sustainable. He said that NGOs have an important role to play through their networks and partnerships.

Closing this session, **Bineta Diop** underlined that while regulation/law is important, it is not enough. Education for people and especially children is the key issue. She concluded by saying that partnership and grass roots initiatives are at the heart of the development goals and a pre-requisite for rural development.

### 2.3 Participation and Decentralization in the Rural Areas

Speakers:

- Nyang'ori Ohenjo, Centre for Minority Rights Development, Kenya
- Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Executive Director, Tebtebba Foundation, Philippines
- Byron Garoz, Coordinación de ONG y Cooperativas, Guatemala
- Karin de Fries, Swiss Labour Assistance, Switzerland
- Demba Moussa Dembele, CONGAD, Senegal
- Moderator: Sayyed Nadeem Kazmi, Al-Khoei Foundation”

The first speaker of this session was **Nyang'ori Ohenjo** from the Centre for Minority Rights Development in Kenya. He stressed that minorities and/or indigenous peoples remain the most marginalised in the Kenyan national development processes. As a matter of fact, national development objectives and policies – as conceived by national-level officials and processes – have not always been consistent with minorities/indigenous people's views, wishes and interests. Statistics indicate that more than 52 % of Kenyans live in abject poverty and a huge number of this population is made up of minorities who are mainly pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, hunter-gatherers and fishermen's. Mr Ohenjo presented a series of recommendations as follows:

1. Minorities and indigenous peoples' rights in Africa should be constitutionally recognized and protected;
2. ECOSOC should take a leading role in encouraging this;
3. participatory models developed should be minority rights sensitive;
4. dialogue among minority and indigenous peoples, governments and development actors should be developed
5. IPOS<sup>1</sup> in Africa need to strengthen their capacity in terms of expertise and resources through training and networking
6. indigenous peoples issue have to be mainstreamed through the media and in the school curricula.

**Victoria Tauli-Corpuz** started by recalling that most rural development programmes are inappropriate or irrelevant to indigenous peoples (IP) realities; in some cases they have even lead to further violation of their basic human rights: dam building projects have led to the displacement of indigenous peoples from their land and to ecological destruction; transmigrations or resettlement programmes have brought about the minoritization of indigenous peoples. One of the reasons is that decisions that have direct impact on IP lives are made in corporate boardrooms, in global institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO or development agencies of developed countries. The consequence is that trade liberalization has led to the loss of traditional livelihoods; the liberalization of investments has led to the appropriation by transnational corporations of indigenous peoples lands and resources. Further she condemned the fact that there are no disaggregated data on IP poverty situations, that IP have been integrated into colonial and post-colonial market economies on very unequal terms and that most of these programs are gender-blind.

In order to address the above-mentioned issues, decentralization is identified as one way whereby existing institutions can become more accountable to the rural poor and enable their participation in the decision-making process. In order to do so, however, she warned that decentralization must respect the following criteria:

- Decentralization can work for IP only if it increases their capacity to self-government, which includes the redrawing of boundaries, the distribution of powers and the recognition and protection of IP's rights to land and resources, cultures and languages;
- Decentralization can work if it strengthens local indigenous institutions, existing customary laws and structures such as the Council of Elders. Governments should explore ways by which indigenous socio-political structures can still be used by IP to govern themselves, notably by

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<sup>1</sup> Minorities Organizations and Indigenous Peoples Organizations

providing these structures with legal personality and clearly defining how they relate to the existing local government structures;

- Boundaries must be redrawn in order for IP to form the majority in the new territory and have the right to control the development of resources and the social policy;
- Decentralization cannot work for IP if non-indigenous settlers constitute the majority at the local level and despotic landlords or loggers are in power;
- IP have put on the table the request for the recognition of ancestral land delineation

IP insist that any development must be done within a rights-based framework. The demand of IP that their free, prior and informed consent is obtained before any development project is brought to their community means that their representative institutions must be involved whether this is recognized by the government or not. Indigenous governance and customary laws as well as resource management systems must be recognized.

Victoria Tauli-Corpuz appealed for the revitalization of indigenous communities in their traditional places of origin through education, agricultural support, other productive activities, infrastructure and the strengthening of representative indigenous institutions at the local and regional levels. Decentralization programs which ensure more genuine peoples' participation and which promote the rights of indigenous peoples to their territories and resources will be crucial to poverty alleviation and rural development programs.

**Byron Garoz** welcomed the fact that rural development has been put on the international agenda again. After 20 years of structural adjustment programs poverty has increased in the rural areas. The state has disengaged itself from supporting small and medium enterprises that have been particularly affected by the macroeconomic policies it has pursued. As industrialized countries keep protecting their agriculture, the alimentary sovereignty of indigenous peoples in developing countries is endangered particularly through the import of genetically modified products. The policy of access to land promoted by the World Bank doesn't work in countries where the ownership of land is extremely concentrated. In the last forty years laws on decentralization have been passed in Latin America that are indeed very promising, but they are not accompanied by the political will to decentralize and by processes that allow the real participation of the population; they are mainly mechanisms used by political parties to manipulate their own interests. In the last two years laws on decentralization have been passed in Guatemala that go in the right direction, but laws are not sufficient if they are not accompanied by the practice of participation and law enforcement.

**Karin de Fries**, from the Swiss Labour Assistance, highlighted that participatory community development promotes a democratic culture and constitutes an opportunity to strengthen non-violent conflict resolution methods. She added that gender relations are an essential condition for the empowerment of agents of change towards participatory rural development. The specific experience in El Salvador she pointed to focuses on the inclusion and equality of opportunities for rural and poor women in municipal policies. She presented the methodology - as a step by step approach - for the elaboration of a successful Strategic Gender Policy that strengthens the capability of the women's group to elaborate proposals and lobby the local government to commit itself to develop and implement a gender policy. There are 5 important moments in this process:

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(1) institutional commitment of the local government (2) actual situation and sector view (3) elaboration of the gender policy as a participatory process (4) the adoption of the gender policy by the local government and the public presentation (5) the monitoring process. The gender policy is also compounded by eight key elements: culture; political and civil participation; labour rights and income activities; housing; land security and access to public services; access to the health system; sexual and reproductive rights; public campaigns to reduce violence; alleviation of the domestic work for women; role of the municipality in rural development with a gender approach. Ms de Fries concluded her communication by presenting a series of recommendations:

1. A real participation and decentralization processes should be incorporated into the strategy of rural development;
2. There should be a participatory community development approach and a clear role distribution between the central and local governments for successful poverty reduction, land and food security, sustainable health, water and sanitation system;
3. There must be a political will to decentralize with sufficient financial and technical resources in order to achieve successful democratization and decentralization processes;
4. Decision making processes have to be democratic and transparent. The social control from grass-root-organizations and local NGOs has to be guaranteed (accountability);
5. Decentralization has to go hand in hand with local autonomy which allows the municipality to promote gender policies;
6. Municipal governments must commit themselves for democratization processes and the participatory elaboration of development policies;
7. Social organizations in decentralization processes must be empowered for equal access and sustainable management of natural resources.

**Demba Moussa Dembele** presented the experience of Senegal, which is one of the countries in Africa where decentralization has gone the furthest. However, according to the speaker, it hasn't however kept its promises in terms of poverty reduction and popular participation.

He reminded that decentralization is a consequence of the disengagement of the central state in the aftermath of the structural adjustment programs of the '80s. By pursuing these programs the state had to cut its expenses in basic social services such as health and education and the population had suddenly to rely upon itself and civil society organizations. Additionally, external aid was very much driven away from state agencies that were suspected of corruption and diverted to NGOs - both international and local - that were supposed to be more accountable and closer to the people.

Senegal had thus to accelerate the decentralization process that had started in the '70s and a Bill on Decentralization was passed in 1996 which gives extended competencies to municipalities and regions in terms of health, education, waste management, natural resources management, environment etc. Local authorities were able to elect their representatives and local economic development agencies were established. In order to support this project the central state instituted a "Fonds de dotation" that was supposed to reallocate the budgetary resources of the state to local authorities.

However, promises were not kept. The most important reason is that the central state hasn't allocated enough resources to implement decentralization. The above mentioned Fund only receives 7% of the revenues of the value added tax (TVA) which is largely not sufficient especially since most local authorities don't have own funds. Demba Moussa Dembele recommended the following:

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- The central state must transfer adequate resources to local authorities and collectivities in order for them to be able to assume their new responsibilities;
- The state has to stop considering decentralization a comfortable way of disengaging itself from its responsibilities, but rather as a great occasion to promote local democracy and participatory development;
- Trade liberalization and privatization of essential services such as water and electricity are one of the main obstacles to decentralization, as they deprive the state from precious financial resources and destroy local production. They must stop;
- Some donors keep seeing in decentralization a way of weakening the central state and encouraging privatization of essential services. This must stop;
- NGOs and the local population must be seen as full stakeholders of decentralization and local elected authorities must stop mistrusting NGOs and CBOs but rather promote a true partnership in the interest of local development and democracy.

## 2.4 The Promotion of Women and Gender Equality in the Rural Areas

Speakers:

- Abby Taka Mgugu, Women's Land and Water Rights in Southern Africa
- Mariam Maiga represented by Ms. Elly Pradevan, Association ZODOO pour la promotion de la femme, Burkina Faso, Laureate of the Prize for Women's Creativity in Rural Life
- Kazi Rafiqul Alam, Dhaka Ahsania Mission, Bangladesh
- Alice Wanjira Muniya, FEMNET, Kenya
- Chitra Radhakishun, UNCTAD
- Moderator: Leslie Wright, CONGO

The first speaker of this session was **Abby Taka Mgugu** who spoke about the extreme difficulty of access to and control of land and water by rural women. Whilst 90% of rural agricultural work is done by women, they have neither the right to ownership of the land nor to the water contained in it. This problem is further compounded by the sometimes conflicting legal frameworks operating in rural areas. Whilst traditional law might enforce one aspect, received law, based on the inherited British or Dutch Colonial system, often enforced another.

She recommended that the issue of land rights is tackled head on to ensure that women have the right to own and inherit land, which will also give them access to the water contained within that land. Governments are urged to support traditional law and adapt it to reflect these rights, whilst underscoring the importance of traditional law in rural societies. Furthermore, Governments have the responsibility to domesticate the international human rights instruments they are party to and attempt to reduce sexual discrimination within their own organizations and institutions.

**Kazi Rafiqul Alam** for his part spoke about the remarkable work of the Dhaka Ahsania Mission in Bangladesh whose overarching goal is to achieve women and gender equality in Bangladesh. In many rural areas, low literacy rates, low education, early marriage and unequal divorce rights mean that women are particularly disadvantaged and powerless. The Mission introduced

literacy drives, education, skills training, awareness raising of rights and income generating activities in close partnership with the local communities. By arranging baseline surveys and ensuring continuous monitoring and feedback, the organization successfully tailored a program designed specifically to improve the situation of rural women. Notably, 80 % of the Mission members are women, and there are clear indicators of the improvement of the status of women, such as higher employment and participation in social and cultural affairs. The success of the Dhaka Ahsania Mission has been replicated by many NGOs in and out of Bangladesh, which Mr. Alam says is indicative of its sustainability.

As Mariam Maiga was absent due to ill health, **Elly Pradervan**, President of the Woman's World Summit Foundation, spoke in her place about the work of Ms. Maiga, a rural woman running her own NGO that instigates sustainable development in rural areas. Ms Maiga's work has been awarded the Prize for Women's Creativity in Rural Life, in recognition of her dynamic leadership. The primary recommendation of Ms. Pradervan was the creation of a "World Rural Women's Day" to promote awareness of the issues at stake.

An interesting avenue for battling rural poverty was explored by **Chitra Radhakishun**. Noting the remarkable reach of postal services worldwide, an initiative has been set up to use this extensive network to expand the reach of microfinance services. Often, postal services run in remote areas where other infrastructures, such as banks or telephones, don't exist. The Universal Postal Union, which represents the 650,000 post offices worldwide, has joined this drive in partnership with UNCTAD. The postal networks are well established and trusted and furthermore many rural poor have savings accounts with them. The Postal Network was then thought as an ideal way to reach out to rural poor with micro-finance initiatives, and especially to empower women who are most of the time responsible for the domestic sphere.

In a very thorough paper, **Alice Wanjira Alam**, of FEMNET in Kenya, put forward many vital recommendations to the forum. The phenomenon of globalization is having important and real effects on the rural poor and in particular women. The most important one is the lack of tangible benefits for rural women, and in many cases the tangible decrease in development indicators. Inequalities are increasing and the gulf between powerful and powerless, rich and poor is growing. Privatization deprives women of services formerly provided by the state, and Governments have been largely ineffective in implementing grandiose promises made at summits. The importance of indigenous knowledge has often been overlooked and the effects of conflicts have been great on rural women. In her list of recommendations, Ms. Alam said that macro-economic frameworks must be rethought at the highest level to take into account gender concerns and equity and justice issues. The method in which aid is delivered must be rethought to overcome charges of cultural imperialism. Decentralization, increased accountability, and democratization are all significant steps in achieving this. Central to defending and improving the rights of rural women are the initiatives of NGOs. Links must be strengthened between NGOs, international bodies and governments to provide impetus for these initiatives.

The key themes that emerged from this panel were:

- women's land rights and access to water,
- the importance of community involvement in improving rural women's status

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- the potential of using existing systems to create sustainable development, such as the postal network,
- the adverse effects of globalization on rural women.

## **2.6 ICTs and Rural Development, by Ambassador Walter Fust, Head of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)**

In his presentation Walter Fust addressed the issue whether information and communication technologies can be a tool for rural development. He concentrated his statement on the upcoming World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) whose first phase will take place in Geneva in December 2003. Stressing that ICTs can help to improve income – for example through information on market prices, by introducing new agricultural methods for an increase in productivity and by directly marketing the products –, to reduce vulnerability and to increase well-being, he very much insisted on the fact the ICTs must be demand-driven: the concept of any ICT activity should be articulated around community needs and contents must be relevant to the local reality.

He then pointed to the WSIS main objectives concerning rural areas that are: 1) providing access for all and thereby overcoming the digital divide and 2) using ICTs as a tool for economic and social development and meeting the Millennium Development Goals. He added that the WSIS plan of action should focus on:

- Development programs that go beyond infrastructure questions
- Demand-driven and content oriented approaches
- The creation, dissemination and exchange of local, relevant content, in function of local needs
- Capacity-building activities
- The integration of traditional and new technologies (eg. Radio and internet) in order to reach disadvantaged populations groups and areas.

## **3. Output**

The output of the Forum was the Declaration that summarized the recommendations presented by speakers and participants. The Statement was presented to the High-level Segment by Renate Bloem on 2<sup>nd</sup> July. The text can be found on the following pages.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL OF THE UNITED  
NATIONS

**High-Level Segment 30 June – 2 July 2003**

**“Promoting an integrated approach to rural development in  
developing countries  
for poverty eradication and sustainable development”**

*Summary of key recommendations from the  
NGO Forum held on 27 June 2003, Palais des Nations, Geneva*

**Submitted by Renate Bloem  
President of the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship  
with the United Nations (CONGO)**

## **Mr. President, Excellencies**

It is a great honour for CONGO, the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, to take the floor here at this High-Level Segment. For over 50 years, CONGO has actively promoted and facilitated the participation and involvement of NGOs and Civil Society Organizations in the work of the United Nations. Today, we are reaching out to NGOs around the world, in particular from developing countries, to further strengthen their presence at the United Nations and to facilitate their efforts to relate more effectively to the important matters treated in United Nations fora.

It is in this context that CONGO organized, for the third time, an ECOSOC High-level NGO Forum that was held here last Friday (27 June 2003) as another important step for strengthening UN/NGO relations and building a true partnership between civil society and the UN. More than 100 participants came together from all regions of the world to discuss and listen to speakers representing grassroot organizations from rural areas. I have the privilege to present herewith a short summary of the recommendations. A more comprehensive paper is on the table as well as the report of another NGO Forum held earlier in New York on 16 April 2003.

Mr. President, poor people from rural areas, 60% being women, are impatient. They cannot wait any longer. They and civil society organizations are pleased that the theme of an integrated approach to rural development and poverty eradication is now high on the agenda, but it has been there before and failed. Yet civil society organizations and people from rural areas have still high hopes and expectations. They look forward to this meeting trusting that progress will be made. They do not want the Ministerial Declaration to begin with: "We have come together to consider that something should be done..." but rather that you say: "We came together in order to do..!"

Out of the many recommendations to meet the Millennium Development Goals I have clustered four areas for your most urgent attention:

### **1. Social integration/incorporation of the rural poor**

This includes:

- To avoid top-down impositions of "solutions", especially on the poorest of poor, but rather empower poor rural people, and in particular women, and use their wisdom and experience to become their own agents of change.
- To promote community and organization development that represent the rural poor, are owned by them and serving their needs. To require full citizenship rights to voice their demands and to bargain for demand-driven programs.
- To fully integrate poor people into a rural development framework consisting of local government, credit institutions, juridical institutions, agricultural support services, health centers, school authorities, water suppliers as well as national and regional government departments.
- To muster political will for a shift in paradigm to a genuine bottom up approach that takes into account the special circumstances of specific groups, including indigenous peoples, women, youth and older persons. They should be involved in the planning, implementation and monitoring of every project and program governments undertake of their behalf and on behalf of their communities.

## 2. Increase access to assets

This includes:

- To redress past injustices, such as skewed **land** distribution, as a starting point for poverty eradication, but at the same time, recognizing that poverty is multi-faceted, address dimensions of **ill-health**, low levels of literacy, lack of productive assets and inadequate tools and equipment
- To change laws and customs to remedy **women's claim to land rights and tenure** other than through a male (husband, brother..) Rural women need reliable information as well as access to justice, notably in regard to inheritance rights.
- To promote a **rights-based** approach to rural development. This will require some courageous political decisions: meaningful protection of access for the rural poor to land, water and other productive resources is likely to involve denying or reducing such access for powerful corporate interests.
- To make access to (formal or informal) **education key** to rural development strategies. Education will later produce economic opportunities for agriculture or off-farm activities, but also overcome psychological barriers that are deeply imbedded in the life of the community. **Education of girls** pays a particular high rate of return and is an especially effective tool for national development. Recognizing that as education increases, **HIV/AIDS infections** decrease, Kofi Annan has even written of the "education vaccine" for AIDS
- To give highest priority to access **to clean water**, including to local water access, village boreholes, community wells, and low-technology maintenance of water distribution installations. The corollary is to invest adequately in sanitation and waste disposal installation and in their upkeep.

## 3. Agricultural development and food security

This includes

- To move from handed down rural development programs to locally driven development for **income generation**, social development and **social protection**
- To establish **support and protection** mechanisms for farmers struggling to get out of poverty, when confronted with weather hazards and natural catastrophes, but also with the encroachment of extractive industries, de-forestation, biodiversity reduction, environmental destruction and water pollution.
- To rectify structural injustice that occurs through the huge **subsidy policies** of the OECD countries to protect their own agricultural markets In particular, "**the international scandal of cotton**" should to be urgently addressed, or as Mr Ricupero said yesterday should require an "early harvest" in Cancun.
- To promote food security and secure land tenure as contributions to peaceful coexistence in villages, to sustainable development and therefore to world peace. This is an additional reason and justification for the mobilization of civil society. It is regrettable that in today's world climate, peasants' organizations and activist human rights groups are being targeted by government actions based on anti-terrorism legislation or attitudes. The Rule of Law must remain paramount.

## 4. Decentralization and participation

This includes:

- To promote decentralization in decision-making as a highly important aspect of rural development, in particular for indigenous people. Decentralization requires a just approach to territorial boundaries, language usage, local-governance

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structures, communal tenure, and empowerment of local associations and communities.

- To make, however, central governments aware, that they cannot abdicate their responsibility to ensure that decentralization is based on an adequate flow of resources to the local or regional institutions.

**Finally, Mr. President,** two crosscutting themes emerged strongly and permeated all recommendations, above all:

- To promote and enhance **women's role** and rights to self-determination and self-expression. Women's access to justice, to education, to services, to political power mechanisms, including electoral processes, to social safety networks and to land was seen as fundamental prerequisites to rural development and poverty eradication. Particularly their role as entrepreneurs, grossly underdeveloped, was seen in need of urgent support by governments and IGOs. The Forum agreed to claim 15 October as International Rural Women's day.
- To promote and enhance rural people's access to modern **information and communications technologies (ICTs)**. These are an increasingly valuable tool for improving the lives of rural dwellers – informing farmers on price movements; arranging transportation; exchanging knowledge of seed availability, of good practices, of new rules and regulations, of investment opportunities. Widespread local-level access to ICT's also empowers the poor to play a fuller role in development and of course self-development.

**In conclusion, Mr President,**

We stress the overarching need for the Ministerial Declaration or any other outcome of this Segment to move beyond nice rhetoric and point towards action in the areas we have highlighted here. Action that will ensure governments and the United Nations

- Comply with existing agreements such as the establishment of National Council for Sustainable Development.
- Support and further develop technical cooperation and collaborative partnerships of civil society with the United Nations and give support to existing intergovernmental organizations and coalitions.
- Stay focused and encourage innovation in the implementation of 'integrated rural development' and
- Use the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) as a major opportunity to accelerate the process and facilitate earliest implementation.
  - Support existing collaborative partnerships with civil society and intergovernmental organizations.
  - Remain focussed on 'integrated rural development' such as in reporting arrangements and implementation task forces.
  - Encourage innovation in the implementation of 'integrated rural development'
  - Use the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) as a major opportunity to accelerate process and facilitate earliest implementation.

#### 4. Evaluation

The results of the evaluation questionnaires that were filled out by participants are the following:

Total units = 22

	Yes	Partially	No
<b>Q 1: Did the Forum reach its objective</b>	15	7	
<b>Q 2: Did the Forum strengthen UN/NGO partnerships</b>	15	5	1
<b>Q 3: Should your NGO increase cooperation with UN</b>	21		1

<b>Q 4: Feelings about the panels</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Poor</b>
<b>Poverty eradication</b>			
Contributions by speakers	13	3	
Response by participants	4	8	2
Relevance of recommendations	11	4	
<b>Agricultural development</b>			
Contributions by speakers	11	4	
Response by participants	8	5	1
Relevance of recommendations	11	2	
<b>Health, water and sanitation</b>			
Contributions by speakers	12	3	
Response by participants	4	8	
Relevance of recommendations	7	5	
<b>Participation and decentralization</b>			
Contributions by speakers	12	2	
Response by participants	4	7	1
Relevance of recommendations	7	4	2
<b>Women and gender equality</b>			
Contributions by speakers	12	2	
Response by participants	6	3	3
Relevance of recommendations	9	3	

	Yes	No
<b>Q 5: Do NGOs have a role to play in strengthening the ECOSOC</b>	18	

<b>Q 8: How do you assess the programme?</b>	
Good and relevant	13
Balanced	7
Unbalanced in favour of one subject	1
Programme too full	10

	Good	Average	Poor
<b>Q 9: CONGO's role in organizing the Forum</b>	14	4	
<b>Q 10 CONGO's contribution to nurturing UN/NGO partnerships</b>	13	4	

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## 5. Special Thanks

As already mentioned, we would like to warmly thank the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and most particularly the NGO Section for their precious support.

We would also like to extend our thanks to the two interns who have helped us for this project: Maxime Gasteen, who has reported during the session and most particularly Edith Rojas who has given a very valuable help to the Programme Officer, Isolda Agazzi, in preparing the Forum, reporting during the session and contributing to the final report.

Geneva, 5<sup>th</sup> August 2003