

Statement to The Millennium Summit

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Madam and Mr. Co-Chairs, Distinguished Heads of State and Government, Mr. Secretary-General, Excellencies,

Last May, representatives of civil society and non-governmental organizations from all over the world gathered in this great hall to consult about humanity's common future and, particularly, about the role of the United Nations in the 21st Century.

The meeting was called the Millennium Forum, and, in light of the wide ranging concerns of its participants, the geographic reach they embodied -- including broad representation from developing countries -- and the depth and breath of the organizations they represented, it was one of the most diverse -- and significant -- gatherings of civil society organizations ever held.

The Forum was significant for its attempt to accelerate the process among NGOs of networking and coalition building across issue areas that has proved to be such a powerful force for change and social action in today's world. The issues we considered included how to establish a just and lasting peace; how to eradicate poverty; how to set humanity on a path of sustainable development while protecting our shared environment; how to see that human rights everywhere are upheld -- at all times, by all nations; and how to face up to the urgent challenges of globalization.

In the end, despite our great diversity, we successfully agreed on a powerfully worded "Declaration and Agenda for Action." It offers a bold vision for humanity's future and outlines a series of concrete steps that the United Nations, governments, and members of civil society themselves can take to address the global problems facing humanity today.

After hearing your speeches here over the last three days, I must say that our vision and plan of action are consonant with much of what has been said here.

I am personally heartened by this and feel that this historic Summit may well be remembered as having opened the door to a long-awaited era of peace, justice and prosperity for all humanity. This new era will, of course, require concrete deeds and not just words.

We in civil society stand ready to work with you and your governments, side by side, in a strong new partnership to create this new world. At the same time, civil society also stands ready to hold you to your commitments if you do not deliver on your words.

Throughout history, from the abolition of slavery to the recognition of the equality of women and men, most great social movements have begun not with governments but with ordinary people.

Even the idea of creating an international organization to end war and establish a permanent peace originated with civil society. Before the outbreak of the First World War, the leaders of a number of international NGOs argued for the establishment of a "Commonwealth of Nations" or "League of Nations" in which all states would

band together in collective security. These same organizations actively supported the work of the League of Nations in the late 1920's.

In 1945, civil society again played an important role in shaping many of the key articles found in the Charter of the United Nations, especially in the area of human rights.

More recently, NGOs have played a leading role in shaping and supporting an International Criminal Court, in the movement for debt cancellation, and in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. Likewise, NGOs have led in creating such partnerships with the UN and governments as with the NGO Steering Committee for the Commission on Sustainable Development.

On a number of occasions, Secretary General Kofi Annan has said that civil society participation in and partnership with the United Nations is not an "option," but a "necessity."

We appreciate his efforts to facilitate effective partnership with civil society at the United Nations. We thank him especially for opening the UN to the Millennium Forum last May. As many of you know, the idea for our Forum essentially originated with Mr. Annan some three years ago when he called for a "companion People's Assembly" to this Summit. And we thank Mr. Annan for making the Millennium Forum Declaration available to this Summit as a UN document.

The Millennium Forum itself grew out of long-established NGO committees and networks. Planning began with the Conference on Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGO), and included the UN DPI/NGO Executive Committee. We sought to build upon an impressive series of global NGO gatherings held last year, such as the Hague Appeal for Peace, the Seoul International Conference of NGOs, World Civil Society Conference, and the Young People's Millennium Assembly, as well as all of the great global NGO forums held in parallel with the major United Nations conferences of the last decade, including Earth Summit, the Beijing Women's Conference, and the Social Summit, among others.

We ask that you review carefully our Millennium Forum Declaration. I think you'll find that, for the most part, we are simply calling on governments to live up to the commitments and the principles that they agreed to in the great global conferences of the 1990s. We are also seeking increased NGO access to the UN General Assembly and its main committees.

Allow me to give you a few highlights of what the Forum called for in its Declaration.

The Forum's participants believe that, when a billion people go to bed hungry, it is a gross violation of human rights. The Declaration calls for immediate debt cancellation. It also calls for a "Global Poverty Eradication Fund," aimed at offering the poor access to credit.

On globalization, the Forum took the view that, while it offers "significant opportunities for people to connect, share and learn from each other," in its currently unregulated form it increases "inequities between and within countries, undermines local traditions and cultures, and escalates disparities between rich and poor, thereby marginalizing large numbers of people in urban and rural areas."

The Declaration urges governments to make serious "commitments to restructure the global financial architecture based on principles of equity, transparency, accountability, and democracy.," stating clearly that the United Nations should be the preeminent international organization overseeing the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO.

The Declaration also calls for a greatly strengthened and democratized United Nations, the most important global institution in the world today -- and the only one currently capable of providing the international framework and coordination needed to address the critical challenges ahead.

Specifically, the Forum called for a strengthened peacekeeping regime, with the establishment of permanent police and peacekeeping forces. It also calls for a reformed Security Council, invigorated through an enlarged membership, more democratic procedures, and eventual elimination of the veto. It also urges the formulation of a draft proposal for global disarmament, to be discussed in a Special Session of the General Assembly.

In this day of global interdependence, a much strengthened United Nations is our best protection against global calamity, be it economic, environmental, the spread of a new epidemic or a major new conflict.

To conclude, the Millennium Forum Declaration seeks to articulate the hopes and aspirations of the peoples of the world. As its opening paragraphs state:

"Our vision is of a world that is human-centered and genuinely democratic, where all human beings are full participants and determine their own destinies. In our vision we are one human family, in all our diversity, living on one common homeland and sharing a just, sustainable and peaceful world, guided by universal principles of democracy, equality, inclusion, voluntarism, non-discrimination and participation by all persons.."

Thank you for your attention.