

**UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND
DEVELOPMENT**

UNCTAD-Civil Society Dialogue

on selected development issues being addressed by
the United Nations system

(Geneva, 10 December 2001)

Papers prepared in support of the issues discussed



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FOREWORD

The 20th century witnessed the emergence of civil society as one of the most relevant forces of change ever to affect international relations. The first international organizations – the League of Nations and especially the International Labour Organization – were founded on the basis of large movements of civil societies in a number of countries. In fact, the tripartite structure of the ILO dictates the participation of civil society in an international institution that is responsible for the formulation of labour rules. Since that time, the role of civil society in the international arena has grown without interruption, reflecting and sometimes stimulating the dynamics of national democracies. Concepts such as transparency and good governance, environmental management, human rights and social values could not have been successfully transferred from the domestic to the international sphere without the crucial impetus provided by groups of citizens the world over.

Today we are used to the participation of a wide range of non-governmental organizations in all subjects on the international agenda. The variety of topics dealt with in this book demonstrates that there is probably no area of international policy that can still be considered a monopoly of government. The groups representing civil society are increasingly well organized and have become the main non-economic transnational force. They are “globalized” in the sense that the values they share are not circumscribed by national borders; and they also contribute to the dissemination of ideas, cultures and perspectives on international issues. International public opinion of the 21st century, as expressed by civil society, is an explosion of variety compared to the relatively narrow diversity of the late 20th century.

In parallel to the increased involvement of civil society in international fora, another phenomenon is emerging: non-governmental groups are having an almost immediate impact on shaping the international agenda, whereas until quite recently there was a much longer time span between the rise of an economic or social idea at the international level and its formulation as an international rule. A recent example provided by the trade agenda illustrates how fast such a process can occur: in early 2001, the issue of the price of drugs and its effects on health policies of developing countries was debated in only a few countries. Several months later, in June 2001, the WTO held a special meeting on that issue. In November 2001, at the WTO Ministerial Conference in Doha, a Ministerial Decision clarified the scope of intellectual property rights and public health policies. The mobilization of civil society was crucial in this rapid evolution of perceptions by international policy makers.

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