

The Millennium Declaration Two Years Later: An Opportunity for United States Diplomacy

Donald Blinken

Secretary General of the World Federation of United Nations Associations
United States Ambassador to Hungary, 1994-1998

All eyes are turned toward the United Nations (UN) with Iraqi sanctions renewal or regime change the subject of the moment. Coupled with the war against terrorism, the Iraq problem more than ever places the UN at the center of global security issues. Due both to Kofi Annan's example and its firm response to September 11, the UN can provide both leadership and action.

Strengthening the UN's ability to speak with a voice representative of its members is the growing role of civil society. The ideals embodied in the opening words of the UN charter, "We The Peoples," putting people at the center, was reinforced by the Millennium Declaration, adopted by 191 nations exactly two years ago. The declaration defines the values, thematic issues and goals to guide the activities of the UN, by urging that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world's peoples, the declaration called for all inclusive political process—participation by all citizens, and greater opportunities for the private sector and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to contribute to the realization of the UN's goals and programs.

A Millennium Declaration follow-up report just released by the 100-nation member World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA) and the Canadian North-South Institute, reveals that there are some 13,425 international NGOs, a quarter of which have emerged since 1990. And the number of NGOs in consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council doubled during the past five years alone.

WFUNA's survey of 250 civil society organizations found that over 90 percent of respondents believe the Millennium Declaration fundamental to achieving global society's goals by paving the way for closer collaboration between the UN and civil society. Similarly, the UN regards partnering with NGOs as a welcome opportunity for advancing the agenda of its individual members. Of organizations participating in the survey, more than half have launched initiatives aimed at meeting specific Millennium Declaration goals.

The term "Global Civil Society," as a London School of Economics study puts it, "reflects an underlying social reality, the emergence of a supranational sphere of social and political participation in which groups and individuals engage with government, business, trade unions, think tanks and international commissions."

Some of these negotiations take place at noisy, over-hyped mega conferences like Johannesburg or Dakar. But most of the constructive work flows from quiet dialogues, initiatives and negotiations at the local level. In preparing the recent Monterrey

Conferences on Financing for Development, the UN first met with representatives of civil society, including the private sector. Not only the UN, but also its institutional peers—the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO)—have accepted that they cannot go it alone.

Even with the best intentions, progress in meeting the Millennium Declaration goals such as reducing poverty or stemming the growth of AIDS is often glacial. If solutions were simple, nations or societies long ago would have found and applied them. The goals called for in the Millennium Declaration, however, are essential in a world in which globalization, how ever viewed, is un-stoppable.

For the United States, burdened with the war against terrorism and as the primary and indispensable provider of international security, these developments are good news. While the US must act in accordance with its self-interest, it can best achieve its goals through cooperation with civil society, business and NGOs. Washington has long accepted civil society's contributions to the fabric of American life. We are often reminded that government cannot or should not try to do everything. Our nation's achievements reflect the critical role that NGOs and the private sector have always played.

By encouraging global civil society to take up the challenges of the Millennium Declaration, the US can also defuse anti-American sentiment abroad in combating terrorism or dealing with Iraq. American reaffirmation of the Declaration's goals, if articulated by the President, would present the US with a unique opportunity to garner public support for the UN at home, while also reassuring our allies that we share their values and aspirations. After all, the reduction of poverty, AIDS and illiteracy and the promotion of democracy and human rights are universal goals. This would represent "public diplomacy" at its best.