Sub-Saharan African NGOs' Participation in the Economic and Social Council: Challenges and

Potential Solutions

By

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DISCLAIMER

The current research has been conducted by Abdoulaye Zorome, an international student from Burkina Faso who is currently in his last semester towards completing a master degree in international relations at Webster University, Saint Louis, Missouri. The research was conducted in the context of an internship and seeks to improve the participation of African NGOs. As a result, the opinions and ideas expressed in the current research do not reflect that of the United Nations or any of subsidiary bodies. There are solely opinions of Abdoulaye Zorome, who interned at the Department of Economic and Social Affairs Non-Governmental Organizations (DESA/NGO Branch) from 1 June to 31 July. Any questions or suggestions should therefore be discussed or addressed to the author.

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Introduction

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is one of the three main bodies of the United Nations, in the same category as the General Assembly and the Security Council. Established under the United Nations Charter, ECOSOC coordinates economic, social, and related work of 14 United Nations specialized agencies[1]. ECOSOC's main responsibilities consist of: 1) promoting higher standards of living, full employment, and economic and social progress; 2) identifying solutions to international economic, social and health problems; 3) facilitating international cultural and educational cooperation; and 4) encouraging universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms[2]. The NGO Branch is the Secretariat of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations, one of the three standing committees of ECOSOC. The first paragraph on consultative status on DESA's website reads as follows:

> The first avenue by which non-governmental organizations took a role in formal UN deliberations is through the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). 41 NGOs were granted consultative status by the council in 1946; by 1992 more that 700 NGOs had attained consultative status and the number has been steadily increasing ever since to 3,052 organizations today (DESA/NGO Branch)

The significant increase in the number of NGOs with consultative status demonstrates the crucial role NGOs have been playing since the creation of the United Nations. Article 71 of the United Nations Charter and resolution 1996/31 of the ECOSOC enumerates details for qualifying organizations to contribute to the work of the United Nations. As the Secretariat of the NGO Committee, the Non-Governmental Organizations Branch, Department of Economic and Social affairs (NGO Branch/DESA) is the office that processes applications from NGOs around the globe that wish to establish a consultative relationship with ECOSOC. There are three categories of consultative status NGOs can apply for: General, Special, and Roster, each category entitling

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[1] More information about ECOSOC available at http://www.un.org/ecosoc/about/
[2] http://www.un.org/ecosoc/about/

the accredited organization to certain privileges and responsibilities[3]. General status is granted to international NGOs whose activities cover most of the agendas of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies platform. Such NGOs usually have a large geographical reach. Special status on the other hand is attributed to NGOs that specialize in a fewer areas covered by ECOSOC. The last category, Roster is designed for NGOs that have a narrow focus or whose work may relate to a specific issue on the United Nations development agenda[4].

Sub-Saharan African NGOs, like their peers from around the world, can contribute to the agenda of the ECOSOC through their many activities conducted at the grassroots level. Such participation, however, falls short of its potential. In an attempt to understand the causes of the relatively weak participation of sub-Saharan African NGOs in United Nations activities, the current research will focus on the periods before and after NGOs gain consultative status. The primary aims of this paper are: 1) to assess the sub-Saharan African NGOs participation by looking at the Integrated Civil Society Organizations (iCSO) database[5], 2) to identify potential challenges to a greater and more qualitative involvement of sub-Saharan African civil society, and 3) to finally make recommendations for a greater and more qualitative participation of NGOs in the sub-Saharan African region.

a. Problem

Such research requires significant fieldwork, but because of time constraints, this paper will begin with several general hypotheses or assumptions that will be explored with available data. The first general assumption is that there are many NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa whose work relate in one way or another to that of ECOSOC, and who would benefit from a
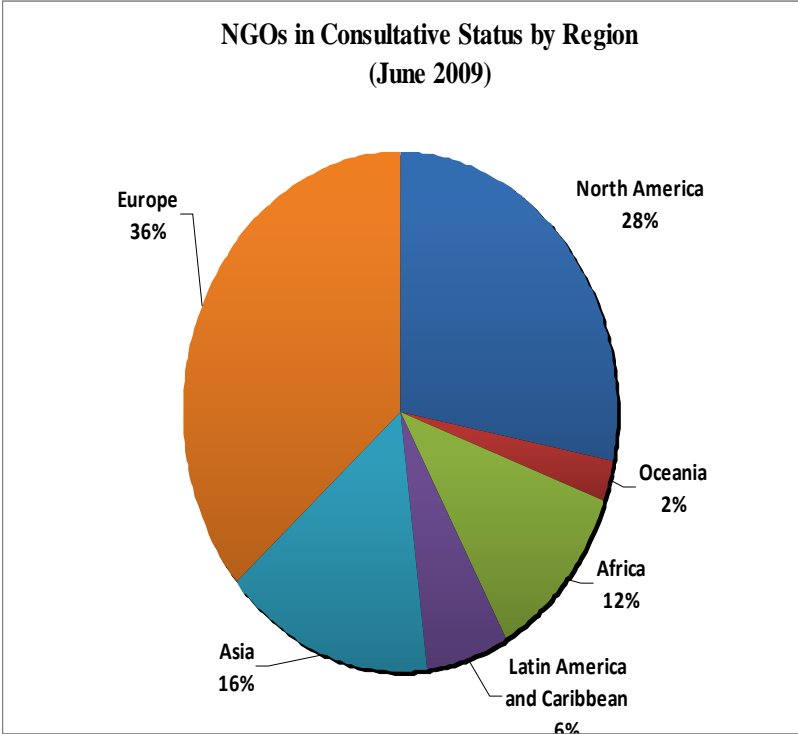
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[3] http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/ngo/
[4] Ibid
[5] http://esango.un.org/civilsociety/login.do

consultative status with the ECOSOC. However, with 46 countries (excluding North Africa[6]),

there are currently only 206 sub-Saharan African NGOs that were granted consultative status

through ECOSOC[7], a very weak participation relative to other parts of the world. Looking at the

participation of NGOs worldwide, especially in the developing world, the African participation

in ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies is reflective of the general trend in the developing world.

Africa as a continent has 12% participation, which is less than Europe (36%), North America

(28%) and Asia (16%) as can be seen in table in the following table.

Table A

NGOs in Consultative Status by Region
(June 2009)

North America
28%

Europe
36%

Oceania
2%

Africa
12%

Asia
16%

Latin America
and Caribbean
6%

Source: DESA/NGO Branch

For a better understanding of the performance of sub-Saharan African NGOs, emphasis

will be put on the two stages of NGO participation with ECOSOC: 1) NGOs before they gain

consultative status, and 2) the involvement of these organizations upon gaining accreditation.

While the first stage of research will help us understand some of the reasons that prevent NGOs

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[6] The population division, DESA, United Nations counts Sudan as part of Northern Africa
[7] http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/ngo/

from participating or seeking consultative status, the second section will have a look at the participation records of Sub-Saharan African NGOs in ECOSOC. As a result, the second part of the paper will be assessing the partnership between ECOSOC and the African civil society. It is worth stating up front some of the reasons why NGOs might want to consider seeking consultative status with ECOSOC before this paper goes further.

b. Reasons for seeking consultative status with ECOSCOC

Consultative status is granted upon recommendations by the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs, comprised of 19 Member States (Angola, Burundi, China, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Dominica, Guinea, Israel, India, Pakistan, Peru, Romania, Qatar, Russian Federation, Sudan, Turkey, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America), hence 3 sub-Saharan African countries serve as active members of the committee. The 19 members are elected on the basis of equitable geographical representation: 5 members from African States; 4 members from Asian States; 2 members from Eastern European States; 4 members from Latin American and Caribbean States; and 4 members from Western European and other States[8]. As noted above, the first avenue by which an NGO takes a formal role within the United Nations system at large is through consultative status. Consultative status in ECOSOC enables NGOs to attend high-level meetings and provide crucial insights in order to achieve organizational goals within the United Nations agenda. Additionally, a consultative status provides NGOs with networking opportunities with other organizations. Such opportunities are important because they allow for a transfer of knowledge and expertise for an effective handling of the most pressing socio-economic issues. Equally important, multilateral and bilateral co-operations can be fostered through such networking. Of course there are more reasons why NGOs might individually seek consultative status; the current list is not exhaustive. For instance,

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[8] http://esango.un.org/paperless/Web?page=static&content=committee

the Indigenous Fisher Peoples Network of Kenya maintains that they are applying for consultative status because "for now, we are forced to participate at high level meetings using other organization's names that have ECOSOC status and that means we are not free to develop our own statements. Our identity and that of the people we work with and for is thus lost."[9]

c. Conceptualization

Consultative status is a generic term used to describe one of the three possible statuses an NGO can gain within the United Nations: special, general, and roster. The terms "Sub-Saharan African countries" and "Africa" in this context are used interchangeably while referring to the 46 sub- Saharan African countries, excluding Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, and Tunisia. Also, the terms Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are used synonymously. To identify possible reasons for the weaker participation of African NGOs, the following hypotheses have been formed and will be tested through the research.

d. Hypothesis 1

The flow of information and the language barrier (especially in francophone Africa) prevent many sub-Saharan African NGOs from fully participating with ECOSOC as organizations with consultative status. For instance, NGOs in francophone Africa cannot understand the information presented on the DESA/NGO Branch website despite the fact that the information contains all the details on consultative status and the process for acquiring it. Therefore, the lack of information and the inability for the NGOs to navigate through the DESA NGO website (which is mainly in English, with a lack of easy access for French speaking countries) constitute two of the main obstacles to NGOs participation.   Outgoing

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[9] As response to the survey question: why did you apply for consultative status with ECOSOC?

correspondences from the NGO Branch are usually in English, even though French is one of the working languages of the United Nations.

e. Hypothesis 2

Civil societies in some countries are more active and dynamic than civil societies in other countries. Therefore, the participation level can be explained by the type of socio-political environment in the country.

f. Hypothesis 3

Another factor that might prevent NGOs from sub-Saharan African countries from greater participation once they are granted consultative status is the lack of resources, mainly financial resources. As a result, they prefer to focus on local issues and allocate their funds closer to home instead of attending meetings and conferences, which are often in New York or Geneva.

g. Hypothesis 4

Before and after gaining consultative status with ECOSOC, NGOs sometimes realize that their unrealistic expectations – such as receiving funding from the ECOSOC – are not met, leaving them to wonder why they made the effort to become involved in the first place.

h. Hypothesis 5

The different departments and subdivisions at the United Nations often do not cooperate among each other in order to reach out to NGOs. Such cooperation is much needed and would greatly benefit the United Nations at large in its noble and ambitious missions. Lacking it, NGOs are often confused about how to most efficiently seek effective engagement with the United Nations as they frequently find themselves wandering between offices that have overlapping activities.

i. Methodology

The primary source of data collection for this research is the DESA/NGO Branch NGO database (the integrated Civil Society Organizations "iCSO"). According to the database, there are currently 318 African NGOs with consultative status (general, special, and roster) with ECOSOC. When narrowed down exclusively to sub-Saharan African countries (East, West, Central, and South Africa), the number becomes 206 NGOs, which implies that there are 112 NGOs for the rest of Northern Africa (the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, and Egypt). This, in itself, may be the focus of another study. Interviews conducted by phone or email and discussions with NGOs representatives who visited the office are used with data from the database to develop this paper.

Although this approach does not perfectly fit the case study model, countries such as Nigeria and Cameroon will be the focus of analysis because they appear to have a greater number of NGOs accredited through ECOSOC. An analysis of the higher participation rate of these countries will be conducted in order to determine the reasons why NGOs from Nigeria and Cameroon have more consultative statuses than the rest of the civil society organizations in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Information flow, language, resources and location are among the factors that this research will take into consideration. Table 1 gives an overview of the participation of sub-Saharan African NGOs in ECOSOC. As can be seen, 14 countries out of 46 have "zero" NGOs with consultative status. These statistics also indicate that, as in most parts of the world, in Africa the most common category of consultative status is "special". Due to various reasons African NGOs seem to not to be able to focus on a broader range of issues in a much broader geographical area, hence there are fewer NGOs with "general consultative status".

Table 1: **Summary of sub-Sahara African NGOs' participation with the ECOSOC**

Number of countries	General Status	Special Status	Rosters	Countries without ECOSOC accredited

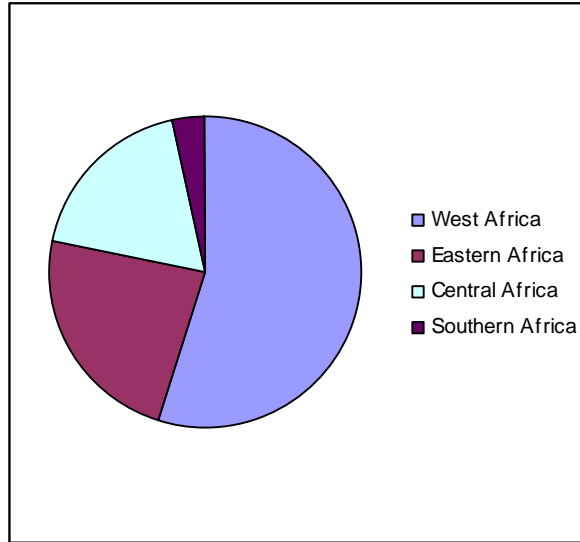|				NGOs
46	5	181	20	14

The results in Table 1 suggest that NGOs with special status are the most common ones, which holds true for the global trend. When looked at regionally (see Table 2), there is an uneven distribution of NGOs. Western Africa tops the other regional groups with 113 organizations, followed by Central Africa, Eastern Africa, and Southern Africa. However, these numbers should not be viewed in absolute terms. A region that has more accredited NGOs does not necessarily participate more than regions that have fewer NGOs (this part will be elaborated on more in section 2 when dealing with NGOs' participation after gaining consultative status). One question for future consideration is why the numbers are so much higher in Western Africa.

Table 2: Summary of NGOs Participation per region

Western Africa	Central Africa	Eastern Africa	Southern Africa
113 NGOs	38 NGOs	48NGOs	7 NGOS

Table 3: Percentage of NGOs per region

Source: DESA/NGO Branch

PART ONE

On the Participation of NGOs before they are granted consultative status

As mentioned earlier, this research not only seeks to improve participation of the NGOs that already have a consultative status with ECOSOC, but also an emphasis is given to new organizations that do not yet have consultative status with ECOSOC. In order to find ways to encourage new participation, focus will be put on countries that have fewer or no organizations that have consultative status. For instance in Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, and Guinea Bissau, the numbers of NGOs that have a status with ECOSOC vary from 3 to none[10]. In Western Africa, Cape Verde, Guinea, and Liberia there are zero NGOs with consultative status. On the other hand, in countries like Nigeria and Cameroon the participation is higher, relatively speaking.

Out of 84 applications that are currently under review as of 01 July 2009, 24 are from sub-Saharan African NGOs, and of these applicants, Nigeria has the most with 4 NGOs applying

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[10] ECOSOC

for consultative status[11]. Overall, there are 285 (currently under review including those that are under pending review) applications for the year 2010 as of 1 July 2009 of which 52 are from sub-Saharan Africa. Since Nigeria always has a higher number, the question then becomes why applications from Nigerian NGOs always outnumber those of other African countries? For instance, by combining the numbers of applications under review with the ones in pending review for sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria has 9 applications (out 52 NGOs that applied from sub-Saharan Africa)[12] for the current 2010 session. An email survey on the Nigerian civil society participation helps understand some of the reasons for Nigeria's relatively higher participation. The survey consisted of short questions on how the applying NGOs learned about ECOSOC to determine the reasons that may explain their countries' level of participation.

Questions were sent to Nigerian, Cameroonian, Kenyan, and South African NGOs. Asking how their country perceives representation in ECOSOC, the Executive Director of Africa Safe Water Foundation responded: "Nigeria is a very large country with a population of about 150 million people. If you relate this to the population of some other African countries like Ghana, Gambia, Benin, [and] South Africa, etc., you will discover that Nigeria could have been under-represented in ECOSOC. Lagos' state population alone is 12.5 million. [The] Quality [sic] of Nigeria ['] s population and by extension the vibrancy of the NGO community are other factors that may have positively influenced active involvement of Nigerian NGOs in ECOSOC activities." This quote tends to confirm the second hypothesis, which maintains that some civil societies are more vibrant and more actively engaged than others. Another part of the response mentions the population of Nigeria. With 150 million, the possibility of having many NGOs is of course greater. However, it is also safe to say that size and dynamism are not the only factors. A

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[11] NGO Branch/DESA
[12] NGO Branch/DESA

similar question was asked to the coordinator of IRENE, President of "l'Association Mauritanienne pour le bien être et le Secours de l'Enfant et de la Mère", and she stressed the lack of financial resources as the main reason that limits the participation of sub-Saharan African NGOs. This case clearly shows that population size and dynamism are not the only determining factors when it comes to NGOs participation. Resources are very important as well because without them NGOs would not come into existence in the first place, let alone stimulate their participation in ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies.

Another factor that might explain the higher applications from Nigeria is its big diaspora. Having many Nigerians in places like the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland, and other developed countries is always a plus because it helps both with the mobilization of resources abroad and also with a better flow of information and support.

A possible additional factor that may help explain relative weakness of participation of sub-Saharan African NGOs is the limited flow of information concerning DESA/NGO branch, and ESOSOC and its subsidiary bodies. A quick look on the UNICs website reveals that in countries like Burkina Faso, the website does not provide a link to the NGO Branch, which could give vital information to NGOs that have status and ones that express interest in having status with ECOSOC. This raises a deeper problem, a lack of coordination within the United Nations system. Though the correlation between the existence of UNICs and NGOs participation is a weak one, UNICs could be used as recruitment tools and extend the outreach attempts of DESA/NGO Branch. There are currently 17 United Nations Information Centers that are located in sub-Saharan Africa: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo,

Zambia and Zimbabwe[13], which means that 17 countries out 46 have UNIC representations. The number of UNICs is not the problem; how effective these centers are in providing NGOs with crucial information about ECOSOC in the field is the issue.

National Politics and the socio-economic landscape

Ideally, non-governmental organizations are independent from governments, hence their name non-governmental. Since the end of the Second World War, non-state actors have been actively and in many cases pro-actively engaged in the socio-economic and political life of many countries, and Africa is no exception. To analyze the weak participation of sub-Saharan African NGOs, it is worth noticing that most African countries are young "democracies". The possibility that some NGOs can be used by governments to convince donors and multilateral partners of their democratic governance should not be excluded. As a result, the number of NGOs in some of these countries does not translate into effectiveness and active participation with ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies because they were not born from a participative grassroots effort, but rather from a short-term political agenda. The political landscape may in some cases discourage NGO participation because some governments may perceive some NGOs as potential tools that could be used by foreign governments to interfere in their domestic politics. On the other hand, if an NGO has been created solely to advance the domestic agenda of a given government, its effectiveness and level of participation at ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies might be limited. Despite the fact that there are very active and engaged NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa, it is also worth noting the presence of a good number of "ghost" NGOs, whose commitment and support to some regimes does not allow for active and effective participation in ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies.

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[13] http://www.unic.org/

There is a strong link between CSOs participation and democracy. Although many African countries have come far in democratic governance, often the transition is still fragile. To participate in ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies, NGOs need to establish strong bases in their countries of origins first, which might be hindered by socio-political environments that do not always encourage grassroots organizational participation. In many sub-Saharan African countries NGOs, especially the ones that were not created to push the political agendas of the political regime in power, are viewed with skepticism and face huge bureaucracies whenever they are dealing with the government. For instance, one of the main documents ECOSOC requires NGOs to submit when applying for consultative status is a certificate of registration obtained from the local authorities. However, obtaining such an important document in some of these countries can be challenging, especially when the NGO in question is interested in sensitive subjects that can potentially "embarrass" the government.

Missing Link

There are currently 14 sub-Saharan African countries without ECOSOC accredited NGOs[14]. These countries do not have accredited civil society organizations (CSOs) not because of a lack of socio-economic issues, but because of a lack of linkage between such organizations and ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies. For instance, a random search of NGOs in Cape Verde returned some 513 organizations that operate in different sectors[15]. Such a large number demonstrates an active civil society in Cape Verde. The question then becomes why does Cape Verde not have a single organization accredited by ECOSOC? One of the reasons why NGOs in this country are not reached might be the language obstacle. Portuguese is the official language, but that in itself cannot explain the absence of ECOSOC-accredited NGOs from Cape Verde because Brazil is also a Portuguese speaking country and it has many affiliated organizations. Consequently, the reasons might be a lack of outreach to the country, whose geographical position as an Island off the Senegalese Coast might be a disadvantage, especially when outreach programs nowadays tend to aim at regional groupings. On the other hand, the lack of participation of NGOs cannot be simply due to a lack of interest on the part of civil society. They likely do not see possible positive outcomes in getting consultative status.

Managing Expectations

When looking at the participation of NGOs before they get consultative status, the question becomes why is the participation in sub-Saharan Africa insignificant compared to other regions of the world? One way of looking at the issue is through the concurrent expectations of NGOs and of the DESA/NGO Branch. Due to their limited resources many NGOs in Africa

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[14] ECOSOC

[15] Accessible Information on Development Agencies (AIDA)
http://aida.developmentgateway.org/aida/SearchDo.do?sourcePage=donorCountry&donor=8900&archive=0&iso3=CPV

expect some financial and logistical help from ECOSOC. For instance, when invited to conferences, whether they have status or not, these organizations rely on funding from the ECOSOC in order to be able to attend. When funding is not available, they can not attend – and their expectations for support are not met. On the other hand, there are some NGOs that have the resources and means to participate in ECOSOC activities, but sometimes they do not know the possible positive outcomes of such a partnership. At the departmental level, ECOSOC should send a clearer message about the advantages and opportunities of getting status, or simply of working with the institution. In this way mutual realistic expectations can be discussed.

To conclude Part I, it is worth noting that the dynamism of Nigerian NGOs was at least partially confirmed because the most responses from the survey questions came from Nigeria.

Although gaining consultative status with does not directly guarantee financial assistance from ECOSOC and its subsidiary, it opens up networking and professional development opportunities to NGOs. NGOs are expected to be integral part of the work of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies. Consequently, when an NGO seeks consultative status with ECOSOC and relies on the former to finance its participation to meetings and conferences, there is a situation of unrealistic expectations. There are other United Nations agencies that provide financial help to organizations that are in a need for such assistance.

The application process

A good number of NGOs who participated in the short survey or to whom the author talked to, mentioned the actual application process as one of the main reasons why the participation is minimal in sub-Saharan Africa. For NGOs like the Indigenous Fisher Peoples Network, an NGO that is a currently seeking status, "the approval process is very complicated". However, in fairness to the NGO Branch, which plays a bridging role between the civil society organizations and the Committee on NGOs, the sole purpose is to help NGOs present a good

application. As a result, it takes constant back and forth communication in order to have a complete and well-elaborated application. Due to the large rotation of reviewers at the United Nations, sometimes there is a vacuum between the NGO and the NGO Branch, which can lead the applicant NGO to believe that it is being neglected. There is a current attempt to simplify the application process, however, by including a paperless option. The paperless option allows applicants and those reviewing the applications to see all communications. Unfortunately, this great resource is still a work in progress and needs feedback from the external users in order to be improved upon. It can be helpful to the process if NGOs know how to use it efficiently. The challenges of internet access and capacities remain obstacles to the paperless system because many sub-Saharan African countries do not have the required technological resources at this time.

Lack of interest

The other reason that is sometimes overlooked in the debate about the participation of sub-Saharan African NGOs is lack of interest. The NGO Branch might try everything to reach out to organizations in the region, but it is also a fact that not all the NGOs are interested in a consultative status with ECOSOC. This means that ECOSOC should possibly consider taking the outreach to the next level and attempting to convince reluctant organizations to join. The lack of interest, as previously indicated, is largely caused by the limited resources of these NGOs.

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PART TWO

Participation of NGOs that have consultative status

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Table 4 below illustrates the performance of West African NGOs in ECOSOC. As stated earlier, Nigeria has the most accredited NGOs in the West African region with 36 accredited CSOs. Though Senegal has 14 accredited NGOs overall, it is worth noting that it has 3 NGOs with general status, meaning that the geographical outreach of these NGOs and their scope of

intervention are much larger. The socio-political environment in much of Western Africa is characterized by relative "peace and stability", which might explain the higher number of NGOs in the Western part of Africa. But the number of accredited NGOs from a country does not necessarily translate into active participation in ECOSOC sponsored and other United Nations activities.

Table 4. West Africa: NGOs with consultative status

Countries	General	Special	Roster
Benin	0	4	2
Burkina Faso	0	3	0
Cote D'Ivoire	0	4	0
Gambia	0	1	1
Guinea	0	5	0
Ghana	1	8	1
Mali	0	9	0
Mauritania	0	7	2
Niger	0	9	2
Nigeria	0	34	2
Senegal	3	8	3
Sierra Leone	0	1	0
Togo	0	3	0
Sub Total	4	96	13
Grand Total			113

Source: NGO Branch/DESA

Below, Table 5 summarizes the participation of Eastern African countries in ECOSOC. It appears that Kenya is by far the leading country in terms of ECOSOC accreditation with 16 ECOSOC accredited NGOs. One of the respondents of the survey believes that Kenya has the highest participation in Eastern Africa because of the presence of many challenges within the Kenyan society. Such an answer is however not supported by the data. If the socio-economic challenges alone are sufficient for a country to have many accredited NGOs, countries like Rwanda and Burundi would not have such a weak participation (1 accredited NGO each). The Rwandese case deserves some analysis because the country is going through a transition after the horrendous genocide in which more than 800,000 people were massacred. Clarke (2004) writes

"Rwandan traditions and culture, coupled with a long history of hierarchical state–society relations, have resulted in minimal involvement of citizens in regional and national issues. CSOs are viewed as weak 'implementers' of INGO and government projects, rather than actors encouraging citizen participation in government affairs." Despite numerous attempts by governments in Africa to more vigorously engage CSOs, the latter's participation is still minimal and highly politicized across the continent. Not surprisingly the few that come into existence end up being used as political tools by the governments and therefore lose their status as grassroots or non-governmental organizations.

Table 5. Eastern African countries' NGOs with consultative status

Countries	General	Special	Roster
Burundi	0	5	0
Djibouti	0	1	0
Ethiopia	0	3	2
Kenya	0	15	1
Mauritius	0	7	0
Rwanda	0	1	0
United Kingdom of Tanzania	0	1	0
Uganda	0	7	0
Zambia	0	2	0
Zimbabwe	1	2	0
Sub total	1	44	3
Grand Total			48

Source: NGO Branch/DESA, June 2009

Central Africa's socio-political environment has been characterized by many social tensions that led to open armed conflicts in countries like Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola. The lack of stability prevents many NGOs in the region from attending high level meetings because of logistical difficulties. Furthermore, the dire humanitarian needs of some of these localities lead NGOs to focus domestically and allocate their resources to pressing local needs. As a result, many active NGOs do not have the time or interest to be actively involved with ECOSOC even though they have status. It should also be kept in mind that some

of these NGOs were granted status before the outbreak of conflicts, but when their countries went through wars their participation with ECOSOC became simply impossible.

Table 6 presents information in Central Africa regarding NGOs with consultative ECOSOC status. As can be seen, Cameroon has the highest number of NGOs in the region because Cameroon has never had an open armed conflict. A strong link can be seen between the level of participation of CSOs in Central Africa and the prevalence of conflicts in the region.

Table 6 : Central African countries' NGOs with consultative status

Countries	General	Special	Roster
Angola	0	1	0
Cameroon	0	22	3
Central Africa Republic	0	1	0
Chad	0	1	0
Congo	0	1	0
DR Congo	0	6	1
Gabon	0	2	0
Sub total	**0**	**34**	**4**
Grand Total			**38**

Source: NGO Branch/DESA July 2009

Attempts to gain first-hand information through survey data about Southern African NGO's participation were not successful. No survey responses were received from NGOs in that part of the continent. As a result, it is only possible to speculate about weak participation based on the information collected from the ECOSOC database. South Africa has a total of 6 accredited NGOs. As can be seen in Table 7, South Africa attended 17 meetings from 1992 to 2009, which is a good record compared to other countries that have more NGOs. Such a high participation is in part reflected by the economic situation of the country. A correlation can be drawn between South African participation and its rank in the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)

Human Development Index. South Africa ranks 121st, ahead of Cameroon 144th, Kenya 148th, and Nigeria 158th [16].

Table. 7: Southern African countries' NGOs with status

Countries	General	Special	Roster
Namibia	0	1	0
South Africa	1	5	0
Sub total	1	6	0
Grand Total			7

Once NGOs obtain consultative status, there are multiple ways they can contribute to and benefit from the work of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies. For instance, NGOs are invited to present written statements during conferences and meetings. The following chart gives an idea of such participation. Although the submission of written statements is not the only assessment tool for NGOs that have consultative status, it can be used as a proxy to determine the level of participation of civil society in general, and in this specific case of sub-Saharan African NGOs. Table 8 illustrates the poor performance of African NGOs on this index. After Oceania, Africa as a continent has presented the least written statements from 2006 to 2009. One of the clear reasons for such a weak participation, as mentioned throughout this paper, is the lack of resources to attend conferences and meetings that are held abroad, especially at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. Language in this case is not an obstacle, at least for Francophone sub-Saharan African NGOs, because the statements can be submitted in one of the two working languages of the United Nations (English and French)[17]. Out of 100 statements submitted in the past 4 years, the continent of Africa has only submitted three compared to Europe and North America with respectively 40 and 29 written statements. In an interview conducted with an NGO representative from Senegal, the question of financial resources was

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[16] http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_20072008_EN_Complete.pdf
[17] Confirmed in a conversation with Diego Rumiany, Staff member in the NGO Branch/DESA

raised as a major handicap that prevents many African NGOs from coming to the meetings, hence their weak submission of written statements[18]. Therefore, the hypothesis that claims that sub-Saharan African NGOs have a weaker participation because of the lack of the resources appears to be at least partially confirmed. The participation level remains the same even when looking at oral statements. For this year (2009), out of the 32 NGO candidates to speak at ECOSOC, there is only one from Sub-Saharan Africa (Cameroon)[19]

Table 8: Written Statements Presented at High Level Segment

Region	2006	2007	2008	2009	Grand Total
Africa	1	1	1		3
Asia	9		6	4	19
Europe	9	5	9	17	40
Latin America and the Caribbean	2	1	2	3	8
North America	12	2	6	9	29
Oceania	1				1
Grand Total	**34**	**9**	**24**	**33**	**100**

Source: NGO Branch/ECOSOC June 2009

Table 9 summarizes the participation of Cameroon, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa. These countries were selected because they have the largest numbers of NGOs with consultative status in their respective regions. In addition, participation at the meetings provides an assessment tool for NGO's engagement with ECOSOC after reception of accreditation. The different meetings covered in the chart were held from 1992 through 2009. The numbers indicate that Kenya attended more meetings even though it only has 16 NGOs that have consultative status compared to Nigeria (36) and Cameroon (25)

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[18] Abdoul Hamidou Sy, President of ACAPES (Senegal)
[19] NGOs Candidates to speak at ECOSOC as of 30 June 2009

Table 9: Summary of Meetings attended by NGOs

Meetings	Cameroon	Nigeria	Kenya	South Africa
Sustainable Development	2	4	13	**5**
Social development	4	1		
Status of women	12	21	35	**11**
Permanent Forum on Indigenous People	2	1		
Public Administration	0			
Forests	0			
Financing for development	0			1
Total	**20**	**27**	**48**	**17**

<div align="right">

Source: NGO Branch/DESA June 2009

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PART THREE

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Suggestions/ Recommendations

In light of this research, exchanges with various NGOs, and also from the researcher's personal experience, it would seem useful that the following recommendations be implemented to support a qualitative and quantitative improvement of participation by sub-Saharan African NGOs.

1) Be aware of the language barrier

First of all, language appears to be an obstacle to many NGOs of francophone Africa. From emails and information presented on the website, the researcher was reminded of the language barrier. As a result, there is a need at DESA/NGO Branch to have the same information on the website in French since it is also a working language of the United Nations. The different interviews conducted with NGO representatives when they came to the DESA NGO Branch for passes revealed that language is a big obstacle. Countries in francophone Africa like Benin and Senegal need easy access to important documents online in French. On the website, documents such as the application, the index, and the guidelines for quadrennial reports can be found in both

English and French. However, the link to these documents reads "forms and documents". If the word "document" remains the same in French, "forms" does not. "Forms" would be translated as "formulaire" in French. This is one small example to stress the need to have DESA materials available in French. (The researcher is bi-lingual and empathizes with the problem.)

2) Avoid the typical answer: "It is on the Website" – and be mindful of the North-South technological gap

The transition from paper applications to paperless is the way forward in a digital world. However, the transition is not easy for many and cannot happen overnight. In most affluent societies access to the internet is quite easy and now even on American buses like Megabus[20] it is possible to stay connected to the World Wide Web. Unfortunately, the technological gap between the North and the South is still a big issue, and the DESA NGO/Branch should be aware of this by avoiding assumptions such as that everybody should be able to access a document on its website. Not everyone has the required technology. Sub-Saharan African NGOs could greatly benefit from training sessions on how to better use the technologies and browse the DESA NGO Branch more effectively. The website should also be revisited to make it more user-friendly by simplifying its content and translating it into French.

If budgets allow, the DESA NGO can plan a regional training session for NGOs whether they have a consultative status or not. To actively engage NGOs, they should be given information about activities and themes of the ECOSOC, hence the need for better cooperation between the different United Nations departments that primarily work with civil societies. Easterly (2006) writes very effectively that "planners raise expectations but take no responsibility for meeting them; Searchers accept responsibility for their actions… Planners apply global blueprints; Searchers adapt to local conditions" (p.6). This is an important concept

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[20] Based on the author's personal experience during a trip to Washington DC on 19 June 2009

for United Nations workers to understand. By adapting to local contexts and including the realities of poor countries in the different services the branch provides, DESA NGO Branch will better serve the civil societies of the developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the latter will be more active and productive.

3) Put resources along with new initiatives

The NGO Branch has many great initiatives already in place as it attempts to reach out to non-governmental organizations. Effective evaluation of the various initiatives is imperative and would help the department reach out to more organizations. For instance, the IRENE network has been put together in previous years with good intent, but despite its ambitious nature, IRENE is not working. According to an IRENE coordinator, Mme Damiba from Burkina Faso, "IRENE existe sur le papier mais n a aucune existence sur le terrain", which translates as "in theory IRENE exists on paper, but has no existence in practice". Mme Damiba noted the lack of resources as the principal reason that prevents an outreach network such as IRENE from reaching its full potential.

Reinforcing the existing outreach programs would be a good place to start. Under NGO Outreach on the website, non-governmental organizations and other CSOs can check information on "NGO News, Best Practices Network, UN-NGO-IRENE Intro, IRENE Coordinators and IRENE Newsletters", which are all commendable efforts to reach out more to NGOs. However, what is missing in the picture is an effective implementation. As already noted, the NGO Branch needs to train, assist, and help NGOs make the transition to the online tools.

4) Regional Training Sessions

New technologies are challenging. In sub-Saharan Africa access is not only difficult, but many people lack the opportunities to learn and master important computer skills. The NGO Branch did a tremendous job in moving toward a "paperless" system. From applications to

passes for conferences and other meetings, the internet can be used by NGOs to make things go smoothly for everyone. However, the plentitude of useful information is not accessible to the layman. During high-level meetings or other gatherings, the Information Technologies Officer of the NGO Branch can offer training sessions to NGOs representatives. Once some NGOs are trained they will eventually help others who might need the same hands-on experience. Such an activity is beneficial for both the department and NGOs. The department could drastically cut the waiting time for badges, for instance. The Information officer could, for example, travel to Africa and train NGO representatives through regional meetings. That way the cost argument could not be used in the future by NGOs, and the department would be able to reach more organizations on the ground.

5) Provide financial assistance to increase sub-Saharan African NGOs participation in high level meetings

Because most of the important meetings are held in the United States and Europe, most African NGOs cannot afford the costs of traveling and other related expenses. To maximize the latter's participation in ECOSOC; the following options should be explored:

A. The establishment of a trust fund to facilitate participation of NGOs from developing countries. ECOSOC, by working with some partners, can make it possible for more NGOs to attend more meetings and conferences. For instance, partnerships with airlines could lead to discounted airfares, therefore making it more affordable for NGOs that have modest budgets (which is most of them).

B. Decentralize the meeting locations. Since the costs associated with meetings and other important conferences are part of the major reasons for weaker participation of African NGOs, it is recommended that more meetings be held in Africa. Having meetings in

Africa will be relatively easy for European, American, and Asian NGOs to attend (Latin American NGOs might still need part of the special budget mentioned above).

6) Have a convincing argument about why an NGO should seek status and be active when it receives one

The NGO branch should develop a document that clearly indicates why organizations should seek status, but also list the responsibilities that come with a consultative status with ECOSOC. During the 17 July staff meeting of the NGO Branch, the idea to have information about the responsibilities for ESOCOC-accredited NGOs included in the final notification correspondence was suggested[21]. This suggestion will make the expectations clear from the very beginning by letting NGOs know what to expect from ECOSOC as newly accredited organizations. Possibly the current reasons presented by the branch are not appealing enough to NGOs. It would therefore be helpful to have flyers and other materials available which specify the reasons and advantages for having consultative status.

7) Cooperation and Coordination among United Nations agencies that serve CSOs

The lack of cooperation between United Nations agencies is glaringly obvious in many cases. Offices like Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS), the Department of Public Information, and the DESA NGO Branch are among key providers of services to CSOs. However, the lack of concerted effort to reach the NGOs affects the effectiveness of the United Nations as a whole. Since each departmental entity has its agenda, the ideal will be cooperation, not competition, among various United Nations agencies. In that regards, DESA NGO should engage more rigorously with UNICs, Department of Public Information (DPI), and NGLS for a more effective outreach. Through UNICs, information sessions and training sessions to use

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[21] The idea was suggested by the Information Systems Officer.

Information Technologies can be improved for a better and more qualitative participation of CSOs in sub-Saharan Africa.

Weaknesses and Strengths of the research

This paper should not be viewed as a piece of thorough research. Time was too limited. It is just an opportunity to pose some of the challenges African NGOs face while trying to interact with the United Nations and trying to be effective grassroots organizations. The fact that the author was able to have short interviews with some NGO representatives when the latter came to New York for various reasons gives the work some objectivity and first hand input. However, such research, to be more effective, requires a considerable amount of groundwork and a better methodology that uses both quantitative and qualitative data. The potential usefulness of this paper lies within the fact that it is an interesting topic and the NGO Branch is always trying to improve its relationship with the sub-Saharan African NGOs. That is both important and commendable. As such, this paper should be perceived as a step forward in improving the participation of sub-Saharan African NGOs. Many more steps are needed.

As far as limitations are concerned, such a task requires substantial fieldwork that will eventually allow for more interactions with NGOs in order to identify with greater specificity the substantive challenges that affect CSOs' performance in ECOSOC. The data presented here are limited because the iCSO database is a work-in-progress. It is constantly improving thanks to NGOs' input and departmental efforts to move to a "paperless" system. As a result, the numbers should not be viewed in absolute terms, but as an entry point to view the participation level of sub-Saharan Africa. Time was another limiting factor. Ideally, the researcher would have preferred more time to spend on investigating this important topic. However, despite all the weaknesses, this research opens up at least the possibilities for further studies of sub-Saharan African NGOs.

Conclusion

The research suggests that sub-Saharan African NGOs do not participate fully for numerous and various reasons. The responsibilities are shared by the NGOs and the NGO Branch of ECOSOC. Concerning the NGOs, it appears that there is no real interest in many cases to gain consultative status because organizations are ignorant of the opportunities that could eventually follow. By stressing more effective information flow, ECOSOC could eventually boost the participation across the region by holding information fairs during conferences and other civil society meetings. The decision made during the last staff meeting of the NGO Branch to make some internal changes in order to better serve and welcome NGOs is a significant step in fixing the interface problem that has frustrated many NGOs for a long time. The department is constantly trying to find ways to better serve the NGO community. The idea to conduct the current research, despite the fact that it is conducted by an intern, shows the quality of a department that is constantly interested in evaluating its operational systems. As far as some of the issues that were identified in this paper, such as the language problem, the lack of information, and the tenuous application process, the suggestions made in part three can be usefully considered. However, problems such as lack of financial resources and some NGOs' disinterest would need more thought and tremendous effort.

(ASWF), NigeriaAssociation Culturelle d'Aide à la Promotion Educative et Sociale (ACAPES),

Indigenous Fisher Peoples Network (IFPN), Mme Kadidia SALL, IRENE coordinator and

president of Coalition of Families for the Fight Against AIDS and Poverty and Mme Khadijetou

Cheikh Mohamed El Mamy , IRENE coordinator " Association Mauritanienne pour le Bien-Etre

et le Secours de l?Enfant et de la Mère (AMBESEM)". Finally, thank you the NGO

representatives who wanted to help , but did not have the time to respond to the survey questions.

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