United Nations–NGO Accreditation Regimes: A Comparative Profile

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The United Nations facilitates various types of formalized interaction with international civil society; perhaps the best known example is the NGO consultative status program within the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). This study sought to determine the prevalence of the ECOSOC consultative status program compared to case studies of five other UN–NGO accreditation regimes, as well as the degree of overlap between the ECOSOC program and the alternative NGO regimes. Findings confirm the dominance of the ECOSOC consultative status program within the UN–NGO dynamic and reveal that most civil society organizations participating in the ECOSOC program do not participate in other UN accreditation regimes.

Introduction

Since its inception, the UN has pursued association with international civil society, the most formal and organized manifestations are nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The UN–NGO dynamic has progressively expanded with various formalized NGO accreditation regimes implemented within different UN organs. The word accreditation is used not in reference to a form of endorsement or legitimation bestowed by the UN upon NGOs for their works, but with regard to the provision by the UN of an officially sanctioned status ostensibly permitting various types of formalized interaction between the UN and those NGOs deemed suitable candidates.

The term nongovernmental organization and the acronym NGO were coined by the UN at the time of its founding due to the need to differentiate between state actors and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) as opposed to non-state organizations with international interests/influence, and by the 1970s the terms had entered common use by the general public (Willetts 2011). NGOs can be regarded as a more formal and organized representation of civil society. Whereas the broader concept of civil society could be perceived to consist of most or all of a population and the entirety/diversity of the views the population contains, NGOs are formally organized segments of a population coordinated behind the goal of furthering an agenda on behalf of a defined constituency (Mowell 2018). NGOs have been described as the best-organized elements of civil society and, accordingly, possessing a better chance of influencing state and international agendas (Riddell-Dixon 2008).

Various definitions of NGOs and descriptions of their goals illuminate why the UN sought association with the organizations. Edwards (2009) regarded NGOs as organizations endeavoring to improve society and to facilitate political, social, or economic change through activism. The World Bank (2002) offered a similarly sympathetic view of NGOs as "private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide social services or undertake development." As the numbers of international NGOs burgeoned in the 1990s, many of the organizations sought to assume roles as stakeholders in global problem solving and international governance via contributing to policymaking (DeMars and Dijkzuel 2015; Bunea and Thompson 2015; Tallberg 2012). Increased association with civil society organs, such as NGOs, can also potentially bolster pluralism and democratic tendencies within IGOs

through facilitating increased information exchange between sources of international governance and the general public and also in helping to hold IGOs, such as the UN, accountable via observer and participant roles (Kotzian 2015).

The primary vehicle facilitating the UN–NGO dynamic has historically been the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) program in which formal affiliation is extended to a diverse range of NGOs via consultative status. Other NGO affiliation regimes also exist at the UN, though little research has been done in terms of assessing and comparing the UN–NGO dynamic across the different formal avenues of affiliation or the association of international NGOs with international organizations in general (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Additionally, most studies of NGOs within the UN or broader international dynamic have concentrated upon one or a small number of organizations (as case studies) and/or a single, narrow issue area (Clark, Friedman, and Hochstetler 1998). This foundational study seeks to compare the prevalence and overlap of formal NGO accreditation regimes at the UN via comparative analysis of the UN–ECOSOC consultative status program with brief case studies of five other formal UN–NGO affiliation programs. The significance of this research lies not only in the fact that it is among the first published studies of the prevalence of NGO accreditation regimes within the UN dynamic but also its contribution to the as yet modest body of literature exploring macro-scale patterns of NGO activism within IOs and the international arena.

Research Parameters

Statistics were obtained from the UN's Integrated Civil Society Organizations (ICSO) online database, which is the most comprehensive available data source addressing UN connectivity with NGOs. An empirical qualitative approach and descriptive statistics were utilized to construct a macro-scale comparative analysis of NGO accreditation regimes as reflected in UN/ICSO data. The statistics collected and analyzed present an accurate snapshot of levels of NGO affiliations with regard to the ECOSOC consultative status program and five other affiliation/accreditation regimes at the time the research was conducted.

ECOSOC Consultative Status

The nature of NGO involvement with the UN has evolved over time, with the ECOSOC established in 1946 by Article 71 of the UN Charter as the primary catalyst for interaction. Article 71 states that ECOSOC

> may make suitable arrangements for consultation with nongovernmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence. Such arrangements may be made with international organizations and, where appropriate, with national organizations after consultation with the Member of the United Nations concerned. (United Nations 2019)

A highly diverse and ever-expanding range of NGOs including those with an international, state-specific and even sub-state focus are represented within the UN–ECOSOC consultative status program, reflecting an institutional commitment to expanded association with international civil society and concomitant flexibility on the part of the NGO Committee regarding matriculation into the program.

ECOSOC accredits NGOs according to three gradations of influence that determine degree of access/input: general consultative status, special consultative status, and roster consultative status. The type of accreditation determines the right and ability to circulate documents, access to informal preparatory meetings, observation of various proceedings, and the opportunity to speak at certain functions (UN 1999). General status is afforded to the relatively small number of organizations that are global in scope, directly involved with most areas of ECOSOC activities, and are perceived to be capable of making "substantive and sustained" contributions. As of March 2019 of 5,163 NGOs holding consultative status only 138 or 2.7 percent held this level of accreditation. Among other privileges, general status allows orga-

nizations to submit written statements of up to 2,000 words to ECOSOC bodies on subjects in which the organization has specialized knowledge. Many of the organizations that hold general status are among the world's best known and most respected NGOs including Greenpeace, Oxfam International, and Rotary International for example.

Organizations with special status are those with operations in multiple countries, have expertise in a less diverse range of issues with which ECOSOC is concerned but are potentially capable of making contributions in several such areas. Special status classification affords less influence/access than general status and NGOs holding this accreditation level may not propose items for the provisional agenda of ECOSOC or one of its bodies but are allowed to submit written statements of up to 500 words (Cassese 1979). As noted in Table 1, special status is by far the most common accreditation level among organizations in consultation with ECOSOC, with 4,053 organizations or 78.5 percent holding the latter designation.

Roster status is for those organizations that are often less international in scope, usually focused on a narrow issue area and can potentially make an occasional useful contribution in their area(s) of expertise. Organizations with roster status may only submit written statements if specifically invited to do so by the UN and the NGO's representatives may only attend public meetings directly relevant to their field of specialization. Roster status is the second most common type of ECOSOC consultative status with some 972 (18.8 percent) organizations holding this level of accreditation. Just as NGOs can be downgraded from inactivity or lose consultative status entirely, they may also petition to upgrade their status to gain greater access within ECOSOC and each year numerous organizations apply to transition from roster to special (most commonly) or special to general status.

Table 1. NGOs in Consultative Status with UN ECOSOC

Accreditation Level	March 2019
General Status	138 (2.7%)
Special Status	4,053 (78.5%)
Roster Status	972 (18.8%)
Total	5,163

Other UN–NGO Accreditation Regimes

While the flagship vehicle for the UN–NGO dynamic is the ECOSOC consultative status program, other venues also exist, often specific to a particular purpose or event. In some instances, NGOs are extended standing so they may participate in a special summit or symposium, in which case the accreditation is temporary, ending with the event's conclusion. An example of such a temporary accreditation regime was that associated with the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), which took place in South Africa in August–September 2002 and formally accredited over 700 participating organizations. An additional and smaller-

scale example of temporary accreditation specific to a project or summit is the UN's recurring conference related to Small Island Developing States (SIDS). At the third SIDS conference held in Samoa in 2014, in addition to the representatives of states in attendance, twenty-three NGOs were formally accredited as participants.

Other potentially more abiding forms of UN–NGO affiliations also exist, perhaps the best examples of which are the programs related to the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), the Department of Public Information (DPI), and the Financing for Development Office (FDO). Established by the General Assembly in 1992, the CSD has since its inception sought to engage with as diverse a range of stakeholders as possible, including hundreds of NGOs that have interest in its mission. The DPI was established in 1946 to promote awareness of UN programs, often via establishing various constituencies internationally, including collaborations with over 1,500 NGOs, many of which have a formal affiliation with DPI. FDO was established within the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs in 2003 to provide sustained support and follow-up for initiatives related to international development, one element of which is the NGO Committee on Financing for Development, which accredits organizations both as full and associate members.

Analysis of the five other UN–NGO affiliation programs revealed them to have modest participation compared to the ECOSOC consultative status program. However, it should be noted that each of the five regimes outside ECOSOC deals with a narrower policy niche than the flagship ECOSOC forum, which was intended to be more general in scope. As indicated in Table 2, among the case studies of the five affiliation regimes, the DPI (Department of Public Information) program for NGOs had by far the most region-specific entries at 868 (entries with no region specified were not included in the data table and were generally negligible in number), most of which were from organizations headquartered in Anglo-America (404 or 46.5%) or Europe (222 or 25.6%). The DPI program appears to present organizations with opportunities for engagement throughout the year, whereas the other four non-ECOSOC affiliation regimes, even if theoretically ongoing in a couple of cases (CSD and FDO), seem to be primarily focused around periodic summits or other special events, thus providing a more limited dynamic for interaction.

Of the remaining affiliation programs, the summit-specific civil society accreditation regime of WSSD (World Summit on Sustainable Development) had the second-largest number of region-specific entries with 603, most of which were from Anglo-America (142 or 23.5%), followed closely by Asia (136 or 22.6%) and Europe (134 or 22.2%). The CSD (Commission on Sustainable Development) program had the third-largest number of entries at 425, the largest numbers were from Anglo-American (116 or 27.3%) or Asian (91 or 21.4%) organizations. The FDO (Financing for Development Office) program contained only 177 total entries, most commonly from African (63 or 35.6%) or European (38 or 21.5%) organizations. The narrowest in geographical or circumstantial focus of any of the five programs was SIDS. The ICSO database yielded only fifteen entries for SIDS (Small Island Developing States), most commonly from Latin America and the Caribbean (six or 40.0%) reflecting the presence and influence of Caribbean microstates and small states within the program.

While these five NGO affiliation programs are distinct from the ECOSOC consultative status regime, the degree of overlap between organizations with consultative status and those participating in any of the alternative affiliations was initially unclear. Although the initial expectation was that overlap would exist in that most organizations participating in these five programs would also hold consultative status with ECOSOC, this does not appear to be the case according to the data collected from the ICSO web site. As noted in Table 3, the largest number of entries for ECOSOC–CS organizations was in the DPI program. The latter had 393 ECOSOC–CS organizations as affiliates, by far the highest ratio (393:868 or 45.3%) relative to the total number of entries among any of the five NGO affiliate programs but still not an indication that most DPI organizations also hold ECOSOC–CS. Ratios of the number

of ECOSOC–CS organizations relative to total number of entries for each of the four other alternative accreditations were much lower, confirming that most organizations within each of these alternative NGO affiliation programs do not also hold ECOSOC consultative status simultaneously: CSD 114:425 (26.8%), FDO 32:177 (18.1%), WSSD 98:603 (16.3%), and SIDS 1:15 (6.7%).

Table 2. UN–NGO Affiliation Regimes (outside ECOSOC) by World Region

Region	CSD	DPI	FDO	WSSD	SIDS	Totals
Africa	49	44	63	117	1	274
Asia	91	94	20	136	2	343
LA & Car	73	59	18	51	6	207
LDC Totals	**213(50.1%)**	**197(22.7%)**	**101(57.1%)**	**304(50.4%)**	**9(60.0%)**	
Anglo Am	116	404	28	142	2	692
Europe	77	222	38	134	3	474
Oceania	19	45	10	23	1	98
MDC Totals	**212(49.9%)**	**671(77.3%)**	**76(42.9%)**	**299(49.6%)**	**6(40.0%)**	
Overall Total:	**425**	**868**	**177**	**603**	**15**	**2088**

Whereas the ECOSOC consultative status program is broader and more diverse in its range of policy foci, as noted each of the alternative affiliation programs is markedly narrower in scope and in potential applicability to the operational parameters of NGOs. However, the narrow focus of other such NGO affiliation programs may actually appeal to certain NGOs with highly specialized interests compared to the more general forums of ECOSOC–CS, to which such specialized (e.g., oriented toward development financing) NGOs may feel they have less to contribute. In short, participation in the ECOSOC consultative status program does not appear to overlap with all other UN–NGO affiliation programs.

Table 3. Overlap Between UN-NGO Accreditation Programs—Numbers of NGOs in Alternative Accreditation Programs Which Also Hold ECOSOC Consultative Status

Other UN Accreditation	General Status	Special Status	Roster Status	Totals
CSD	6	33	75	114
DPI	41	258	94	393
FDO	0	25	7	32
WSSD	2	77	19	98
SIDS	0	1	0	1
Totals:	49	394	195	638

Evidence of this can also be seen in the data collected for the CSD (Commission on Sustainable Development) program in Table 3. In no other instance in this study did entries for ECOSOC affiliates with roster status substantially outnumber those holding special status

within a category. As special status is by far the most common accreditation status within the ECOSOC affiliation program (see Table 1—78.5 percent held special status and 18.8 percent held roster status), organizations holding that level of accreditation would presumably always outnumber those with other accreditation levels. Yet within the CSD program, seventy-five (65.8 percent) of 114 ECOSOC–CS organizations held roster status. Roster status is for organizations with a specialized and limited scope, circumstances that seem to apply to each of the five non-ECOSOC affiliation programs to varying degrees at least in comparison to the potentially broader parameters of the ECOSOC–CS regime. In four of the five non-ECOSOC affiliation programs, the percentage of roster status organizations is higher than the ECOSOC–CS average of 20.9 percent, intimating that these alternative UN-accreditation programs may appeal to NGOs with more specialized parameters.

Summary and Conclusion

Analysis of statistics in the UN ICSO database supports the perception that the ECOSOC consultative status program is the principle vehicle for formal UN affiliations compared to five other established NGO programs. Whereas over 5,163 organizations held consultative status with ECOSOC at the time of writing, the number of formal UN affiliations reported in the five alternative affiliation regimes analyzed ranged from a low of fifteen (Small Island Developing States conference/initiative) to a high of 868 (UN Department of Public Information). Data also revealed a lack of significant overlap between participation in the ECOSOC consultative status program and participation in other formal UN–NGO regimes. Among the five alternative accreditation regimes analyzed, NGOs accredited to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development had the highest percentage of overlap with only 26.8 percent of the organizations also holding ECOSOC consultative status and those NGOs accredited to the Small Island Developing States initiative having the least overlap with 6.7 percent simultaneously holding consultative status.

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