

Working Group “Democratic Governance and Civil Society” Report
Santiago, April 29, 2005

The debate among representatives of NGOs and governmental delegations put in evidence the importance of a fluent and permanent dialogue, at domestic and international level, and the significance of mutual accountability in this dialogue aimed to strengthen and support shared principles of democratic governance. Comments and recommendations of NGOs representatives from Brazil, Chile, Palestine, Russia and South Africa were presented during the debate. Governmental representatives of Chile, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Gambia, Jamaica, Norway, Panama, the Republic of Korea, Slovakia, Venezuela and the representative of the Club of Madrid took part in this innovative discussion as well.

The key question of this panel introduced by the chairman was: how can civil society promote democratic governance? Participants addressed the problem from different perspectives corresponding to their various backgrounds. National and regional experience were referred to by many participants in this context. The following issues were identified as the main problems:

- There is a gap between the governments represented by the political parties and the citizens. This phenomenon is sometimes called “the deficit of democracy”. To overcome the gap it is necessary to extend the influence of civil society.
- The focus on fair political parties (resistant towards corruption, clientelism, fair nomination process, etc.) plays an important role in the civil society. But free elections are only minimalist perspective of democracy. It is the overall participation that enhances democracy.
- One of the proposed definitions of democracy was that democracy means mobilized citizens. Normally functioning civil society does not need heroes. It is well structured, rich in forms and goals. When heroes are needed, civil society failed.
- There were concerns expressed regarding the relation between governments and NGOs. Sometimes governments don’t see NGOs as partners but a troublemaker and are rather frightened of them. Instead they should treat them as a source of expertise which could get broader support of public for the government policies.
- In the form of different NGOs, the civil society in taking more active part not only on national level but also in international politics. There is a need to support international cooperation of NGOs in global scale. Not only “big names” among NGOs deserve our support and respect but also the small ones, which represent grassroots of democracy.

- It is important that NGOs be as transparent as they expect the governments to be- in terms of funding, structures and partners.
- The civil society is much more than NGOs. The so-called “public space” includes also independent media, universities, solidarity actions, local communities and the citizen as individuals. Even the governments are part of it. New technologies can be an important instrument to build consolidate this “public space”
- Some post-communist countries shared their experiences with the democratic transition. Their representatives referred to certain apathy of citizens being still present after decades of totalitarian regimes. After almost 15 years of democracy, there also is an opposite problem- people start to think that participation is not necessary anymore. The result is the decline of engagement and low participation in the elections. Governments use different ways of stimulation-including educational programs, e-government,etc.
- Among other important problems pointed out were education toward democracy and the need to redefine security. Poverty was identified as a serious security issue.