

Social Watch: promoting accountability

Social Watch, a network that today has members in over 70 countries around the world, was created in 1995 as a “meeting place for non-governmental organizations concerned with social development and gender discrimination.” This network was created to respond to the need to promote the political will required for making the United Nations promises come true. Social Watch, which is continually growing both qualitatively and quantitatively, has published 16 yearly reports on progress and setbacks in the struggle against poverty and for gender equality. These reports have been used as tools for advocacy on a local, regional, and international level.

From its number 0, published in 1996, to this present issue, the 16th, the *Social Watch Report* has compiled more than 670 national reports from civil society organizations, all of them with the common aim of reminding governments of their commitments and tracking their implementation, both country by country and at the international level.

The present issue, featuring contributions from more than 65 national Social Watch coalitions, carries forward the idea that brought the network into existence in 1995: the need to generate tools and strategies to rectify the lack of accountability mechanisms and ensure compliance with international commitments related to social policies and development goals.

In the decade Social Watch was created, a series of high-level United Nations conferences, starting with the ‘Children’s Summit’ in 1990 and ending with the Millennium Summit in 2000, redefined the global social agenda. In 1995, the Social Summit (Copenhagen) and the Women’s Conference (Beijing) defined, for the first time, gender equality and the eradication of poverty as common universal objectives, setting concrete targets and timelines to achieve the goal vaguely formulated in 1946 in the UN Charter as “dignity for all”. To promote the political will needed for those promises to become a reality, the Social Watch network was created as a “meeting place for non-governmental organizations concerned with social development and gender discrimination” (*Social Watch No. 0*, 1996), by a group of civil society organizations.

Thus, the *Social Watch Report* was formulated as a powerful tool for the presentation of internationally available statistical information and for reporting on qualitative aspects of the issues addressed through analyses by social organizations working at a national level. A yearly publication, the Report is devoted to progress and setbacks in the struggle against poverty and for gender equality, two largely overlapping objectives, since the absolute majority of people living in poverty are women.

The Social Watch yearly reports, while adding an international dimension to local efforts and campaigns, became the first sustained monitoring initiative on social development and gender equity at a national level, and the first to combine both in one international overview.

The report N°0, published in 1996, featured contributions from 13 organizations; since then, the network has been growing steadily. Currently, Social Watch has members (“watchers”) in over 70 coun-

tries around the world, and membership increases each year.

The local, the global and the Report

Every year Social Watch chooses to analyze a different topic in depth through its Report, usually focusing on issues under discussion on the international agenda that can be addressed from a local perspective. Experts from diverse origins and disciplines contribute alternative views on the issues through thematic articles. This international perspective is complemented with national and regional reports through which member organizations contribute with a local perspective, reporting on the state of

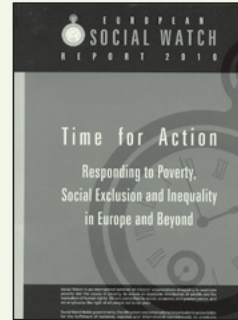
affairs in their countries in relation to each year’s specific theme.

In addition, Social Watch produces indexes and tables with comparable international information, presenting a macro-perspective of the situation related to certain dimensions of development while also providing national level readings. Social Watch has developed alternative indicators to measure progress or setbacks in gender equity and the meeting of basic human capacities, which are now used as reference points for both civil society and international institutions. These are: the Gender Equity Index (GEI), and the Basic Capabilities Index (BCI).

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN NATIONAL GROUPS AND THE SOCIAL WATCH NETWORK

1. Coalitions must be based in the country and be active in social development issues in that country (not exclusively as academics or consultants).
2. Their basic commitment to the international network is to provide a national report, with their own conclusions and determination of priorities, to be included in the annual publication.
3. They are expected to use their national report and the global report in lobbying activities at a national level.
4. They must be open to the incorporation of other organizations, work actively to broaden awareness of Social Watch and encourage the participation of other organizations.
5. They are responsible for raising funds for their activities. National coalitions are not dependent for funds on, or financially accountable to, the Secretariat or any other international Social Watch entity.
6. Each coalition determines its own organizational structure.
7. Social Watch membership and the exercise of governmental functions are absolutely incompatible.
8. Cooperation with other national platforms should be encouraged at sub-regional, regional and global levels.
9. In cases of conflicts between members/participating organizations of a coalition on issues related to Social Watch (e.g. nomination of the focal point, contribution to the Social Watch Report, nomination of delegates to the Social Watch Assembly) all parties involved have to demonstrate their willingness to solve the problems at the national level. If, in exceptional cases, an agreement cannot be reached, the Coordinating Committee can take the necessary decisions.
10. In order to demonstrate their affiliation to the network all coalitions are encouraged to use the Social Watch logo for national activities directly related to goals and objectives of Social Watch. They are requested to inform the International Secretariat about these activities. In other cases they have to seek permission from the International Secretariat or the Coordinating Committee in advance for other uses of the Social Watch name and logo.

NOTE: The Memorandum of Understanding was adopted during the 1st General Assembly, Rome, 2000. Available from: <www.socialwatch.org>.



Although members use the document for advocacy work in diverse situations, report launches, as well as index launches, are key opportunities for dissemination of its contents, both taking place in relevant spaces for international and national debate and decision-making. The report is published by the Secretariat in several languages: Spanish, English, French, Arabic and Russian. Some national coalitions also publish their own versions of the report: Spain, Italy, Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Europe, India, Brazil and the Philippines. Other coalitions publish an array of materials. The Czech and Italian Social Watch coalition, for instance, publish the Gender Equity Index, while Ghana's Social Watch has published a compilation of its national reports and the Beninese Social Watch coalition issues a quarterly, *Social Watch Bénin*. Also, in February 2011 the European report was launched: *Time for Action Responding to Poverty, Social Exclusion and Inequality in Europe and Beyond*.

In addition, Occasional Papers are published, mainly to help build the capacity of member coalitions, regional training workshops are organized, and position papers are produced¹. For example, in

2011 Social Watch published the Occasional Paper 7 entitled “*Centroamérica y la sociedad civil – Desafíos en común – Derechos humanos, desarrollo sostenible*”, which offers thematic reports on problems the region is facing, and national reports.

Through communications methods via website, e-newsletter and its Facebook page, Social Watch utilizes new multimedia and tools to disseminate information on gender, development and human rights issues, generate discussions among fellow civil society practitioners, and conduct outreach to policymakers and journalists. Advocacy, communications and campaigning strategies complement each other to achieve its goals.

On several occasions, Social Watch spokespersons have addressed the UN General Assembly and other intergovernmental bodies on behalf of the network or wider civil society constituencies. The network has kept national coalitions informed about global decision making processes and enabled members to participate in these developments.

A flexible network

As the “meeting place” has grown, several aspects of it have evolved, but the founding ideas and objectives remain. In preparing for their participation in the Copenhagen Social Summit, civil society organizations adopted flexible and *ad hoc* ways of organizing as a network. No formal governing structure or steering committee was created and no stable coordinating group was established. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) preferred to inform each other and coordinate activities in horizontal open spaces, an approach that some analysts regard as a forerunner of the organizational format later adopted by the World So-

cial Forum. Many of the NGOs that took part in the Social Summit later formed the backbone of Social Watch. As a result, the structure and functioning of the network preserves much of the original flexibility and openness.

In addition to national coalitions, the network is structured around three bodies: the General Assembly, the Coordinating Committee and the International Secretariat. In recent years, some regional and sub-regional coordination structures were established as a space for discussion - not as a necessary intermediate body to link the national with the global.

The Social Watch network is not an incorporated entity and it did not start by drafting its governing bylaws. Instead, a short Memorandum of Understanding between national groups and the network (see box) became the basic framework establishing mutual expectations, respecting both the autonomy of national coalitions and democratic, horizontal decision-making. A key principle that distinguishes Social Watch from other international civil society networks is that no central body provides funds for its members. These operational principles help avoid the tensions associated with donor/recipient relationships within the network – since there aren’t any – and also the loss of energy that could result from lengthy discussions about money, budgeting and reporting, as well as procedural matters. It has also resulted in members’ strong sense of tenure over the network.

National coalitions organize the way they want – or can – according to the conditions in each country. The membership of Social Watch coalitions is very diverse, including research institutes or centres, NGOs, grassroots organizations, trade unions, women’s groups, rural organizations and others.

1 The first Occasional Paper by Mirjam Van Reisen, *The Lion’s Teeth*, examines the political context in which Social Watch was created. The second, by Ana María Arteaga, *Control Ciudadano desde la base*, analyzes the democratization of international human rights instruments experience in Chile in 1997. The third, a compilation by Patricia Garcé and Roberto Bissio, introduces the experience of monitoring Copenhagen goals through the concrete example of Social Watch. Papers 4 and 5, coordinated by the Social Watch Social Sciences Research Team, address poverty and inequality in Latin America and the links between poverty and human rights. The Paper 6 *Beijing and Beyond – Putting Gender Economics at the Forefront* launched during the review of the Committee on the Status of Women marking the 15th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Occasional Papers available from: <www.socialwatch.org/taxonomy/term/459>.



Global Assembly

The Global Assembly is the Social Watch network's highest directive body. Policy discussion and medium- to long-term strategic planning happens in its realm, which serves as a decision-making forum. However, it is also a space for reinforcing the sense of belonging and strengthening the network's identity and unity. In addition to setting medium- and long-term priorities and identifying potential alliances in advocacy strategy, the Assembly elects members of the Coordinating Committee to whom coordination and political leadership between assemblies are delegated. It takes place every three years and has been held five times: in Rome 2000, Beirut 2003, Sofia 2006, Accra 2009, and most recently, in 2011², in Manila. The Manila Assembly concluded that the current growth-led economic model is economically inefficient, socially unjust, environmentally damaging and politically unsustainable and pledged to challenge the prevailing economic paradigm based on GDP growth worldwide. Social Watch will also contribute to the current climate negotiations and advocate for innovative sources of financing for poverty eradication and gender equality.

Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee (CC) is the key political body for the 'daily' work of the network, with an organizational structure which requires fluid communication, facilitated principally through an email list, plus biannual face-to-face meetings and regular telephone conferences to discuss specific issues.

As the CC's task is to "ensure the political visibility and participation of the network in relevant spaces and processes,"³ its composition endeavours to represent a geographical and gender balance, as well as considering the contribution, in terms of experience and capabilities, that members can provide to the whole network. In general, the CC's decisions are adopted by consensus, and every single decision (and discussion) is communicated to the watchers in a timely manner. The constant participation of two Secretariat members as *ad hoc* members of the CC ensures coordination between the two bodies, with the function of the Secretariat being to support and implement the strategic decisions made.



Vice President of the Philippines, Jejomar Binay, with members of Social Watch network at the official inauguration of the Social Watch Global Assembly, Manila, July 2011.

International Secretariat

The Secretariat is the main executive body of Social Watch. The first external evaluation of the network (1995-2000) noted that, "Of the various roles in the Social Watch network, that of the Secretariat has changed the most" (Hessini and Nayar, 2000). Originally the Secretariat's function was limited to responsibility for the production of the Report, but due to the network's growth it has subsequently incorporated a series of new functions, including research, capacity building, campaigning, promotion of the network and its representation in international forums.

Promoting accountability

The Accra Assembly, held in October 2009, endorsed the concept of "mutual accountability" among members and among the different bodies of the network (Secretariat, CC, members). Social Watch believes that the key action to achieve poverty eradication, gender equality and social justice happen primarily at the local and national level and, therefore, its international activities and structures should be accountable and at the service of national and local constituencies, and not the other way around.

Social Watch will achieve its objectives through a comprehensive strategy of advocacy, awareness-building, monitoring, organizational development and networking. Social Watch promotes people-centred sustainable development. Peace is a pre-condition for the realization of human rights and the eradication of poverty. But also poverty and lack of respect for human rights are at the root of many armed conflicts. Therefore the devastating impact of conflict and post-conflict situations on people is of particular concern for Social Watch. ■

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2 Final reports, working papers and other materials from these five Assemblies available from: <www.socialwatch.org/node/62>.

3 The document describing the nature and mandate of the Coordinating Committee was agreed upon at the 2nd General Assembly in Beirut 2003. Available from: <www.socialwatch.org/node/9388>.

THE KEY ROLE OF SOCIAL WATCH

Juan Somavia¹

As many of you know, I am a great supporter of Social Watch. I believe that this accountability movement that you initiated within, and after, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen has certainly proven its worth and my civil society soul is fully, fully with you. Thank you for the magnificent job you have done in monitoring the commitments of governments. You have persistently reminded them, as well as international organizations, business, and NGOs of the need to act on them.

The major conferences of the 1990s defined agendas for transformation from the UN. It was a time when governments began to question prevailing dogmas with a sustainable development vision. Many governments were then ready to give leadership in shaping new approaches. But the commitments of the 1990s became increasingly subordinated to the demands of a model of deregulated globalization that has become increasingly unbalanced, unfair, and I believe politically unsustainable. Today the courage, the resolve, and the space to think and act differently are much, much weaker. So this puts a premium on the role of civil society and social movements as agents of change. And today Social Watch is more necessary than ever before.

Dear friends, tempting as it is to look back, we must take stock of the current reality and move forward. The reason: financial and economic crises are clear manifestations of an inefficient growth pattern that has created indecent levels of income and wealth concentration. Not surprisingly, there has been a distinctive weakening of a human rights approach. We know that the transformations we wish to see in our societies must be driven by the force of social movements and of social struggle. Social progress demands constant vigilance and constant activism. The Millennium Development Goals helped to bring a certain focus and a means of measuring progress and we can chalk off some successes in the reduction of absolute poverty since 1990. But at the same time, the facts are that globally 3.5 billion people have the same income as the top 61 million people.

Even here in dynamic Asia we see rapid growth in output, but slow growth in decent jobs and wages. Also more than 200 million are officially unemployed worldwide, including nearly 80 million young women and men, and youth unemployment rates are sometimes seven to 10 times higher than the rate for others. And the number of workers in vulnerable employment, 1.5 million, and those working but surviving on less than two dollars a day, some 1.2 billion, are on the rise again. This is certainly not the path to sustainable development. People are rightly demanding more fairness in every aspect of their lives. In three quarters of the 82 countries with available information a majority of individuals are getting increasingly pessimistic about their future quality of life and standards of living. Too many feel squeezed, including the middle classes. At the same time, they see many governments with either too little strength or too little will to reign in the unaccountable power of financial operators who have come to wield so much negative influence on our societies. On the one hand, we have financial institutions deemed too big to fail, and on the other many people who feel they are treated as if they are too small to matter. This can't go on.

The financial and economic crises shocked the world into realizing that change was essential. Yet there are many, too many, indications of a return to business as usual, and this is a recipe for disaster. So how can we move forward? To begin with, by putting decent work and social protection as key objectives of sustainable development growth patterns. Many, perhaps most of the tensions we are experiencing come together in the world of work. Decent and productive work is central to human dignity, to the stability of people's lives and families, to peace in our communities, as well as in our societies and to strong, sustainable economic growth. Let me quote: "Poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere". This principle of the ILO's constitution reflects, as you have said, the right of all people not to be poor. And every person living in poverty knows that working out of poverty, a productive job, is their best chance at a life of dignity. Labour is not a commodity, work is central to human dignity, if you want peace you must cultivate social justice, these are the operating principles of the ILO. And the labour market is a gateway to social justice when it respects human dignity, guided by the notions of freedom, of equity, and equality.

The ILO and its agenda are at the heart of real social processes. We were born as an institution in 1919 out of the social struggles at the end of the 19th



century. In the unfolding Arab revolt and revolution we have heard impassioned calls for jobs and social justice, freedom and democracy, all embodied in decent work. Moving towards a different pattern of growth with social justice is technically possible, yet we know politically difficult – too many entrenched interests. And that's where you are key.

Social Watch can play a major role in driving this agenda. It requires, for example, a new policy mix that generates higher levels of investment in the real economy, in particular, small enterprises, and not in financial products that do not create value or jobs; yields a fairer relationship between productivity gains and salaries; produces income led growth and strikes a balance between export led strategies and domestically driven demand; enables all to participate through relevant training and educational opportunities; allows for balance and synergy through policy coherence -- for example, in the creation of green jobs; places rights at work and social dialogue at the heart of policy making, and this policy mix must be guided by the objective of sharing the benefits of globalization equitably in a context where voice, participation and democracy flourish.

This year at the International Labour Conference, which is our annual conference, we had two major breakthroughs that can be important elements in the new paradigm for growth with social justice. First, the new convention on domestic workers brings the system of rights to the informal economy. Domestic workers have long mobilized to get the protection and respect to which they are entitled and now we must ensure that the convention is ratified and implemented. And secondly, we are moving towards approving next year in ILO standards, on a universal social protection floor to promote social security strategies that are protective and empowering, productive and sustainable, and which stimulate aggregate demand. Today we must remember 80 percent of workers have no access to social security. This is set within the framework of broader national strategies to reduce poverty and formalize informal employment. These I believe are strong building blocks of social justice and I invite you to mobilize around them and your support can be invaluable. I also want to mention that there is a nascent decent work movement that coalesces around the 7th of October each year, which has been declared by the International Trade Union Confederation as International Decent Work day and you may wish to join in.

Dear friends, let me conclude; we have all been inspired by the courage, the clarity, the energy of Arab youth, but turning dreams into reality is a task for all of us. And the direction of change is never guaranteed, we must all be watchful. We must drive change towards balanced and just outcomes. And we must all be held accountable. The current growth model that has evolved since the early 1980s has become economically inefficient, socially unstable, environmentally damaging and politically unsustainable. So it must be changed. But getting there will probably lead to increased social conflict. But as we know, history tells us that out of social struggle can come positive change. And as you know, when you choose to challenge prevailing dogmas, when you choose to defend human rights, gender equality and other values that are under assault, when you want to make societies better, you also make another choice: the choice to swim against the tide of entrenched interests. So it is difficult, and will always be difficult. And that is why commitment, conviction, persistence, the positive energy not to be discouraged is so essential. And you all have that. And that is the spirit of Social Watch. What you are doing is vital. I wish you the strength and imagination to carry on your invaluable work and invite you to work with the ILO towards a new era of social justice. Thank you so very much.

1 Speech from General Director of the International Labour Organization (ILO) to the General Assembly in Manila, Philippines 2011, <www.socialwatch.org/varios/manila/videos.htm>