

Social Watch: promoting accountability

This is the 17th global report published by Social Watch since 1995 on the implementation of international commitments to eradicate poverty and achieve gender justice. In this effort to voice independent assessments, the Social Watch reports have compiled and published 782 original country reports from civil society organizations.

The present issue, featuring contributions from 44 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 aspirational international commitments.

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 that goal, which was already implicit in the 1946 UN Charter promise to achieve "dignity for all." To promote the political will needed for those promises to become a reality, Social Watch was created as a "meeting place for non-governmental organizations concerned with social development and gender discrimination."

The *Social Watch reports* were formulated as tools for reporting on qualitative aspects of the issues addressed by social organizations working at a national level. The reports add an international dimension to local efforts and campaigns and they 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 first report featured contributions from 13 organizations in 1996; since then, the network has been growing steadily and currently, Social Watch has members ("watchers") in over 70 countries around the world.

The local, the global and the report

Every Social Watch report proposes issues under discussion on the international agenda that can be addressed from a local perspective. Through national and regional reports member organizations contribute their perspectives. The global report, in turn, supports their advocacy work.

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.

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 Social 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, regional and sub-regional coordination structures were established as needed. In big countries like India, sub-national reports provide participation spaces at state level.





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 became the basic framework establishing mutual expectations, respecting both the autonomy of national coalitions and democratic, horizontal decision-making.

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.

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. 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 has been held five times: in Rome 2000, Beirut 2003, Sofia 2006, Accra 2009, and Manila in 2011.

Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee (CC) ensures the political visibility and participation of the network in relevant spaces and processes. 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.

International Secretariat

The Secretariat is the main executive body of Social Watch. Its function was originally

limited to the production of the Report, but as the network’s grew it incorporated new functions, including research, capacity building, campaigning, promotion of the network and its representation in international forums. In turn, as regional coordinations strengthen, they share these tasks.

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. ■

