

# Social Watch: promoting accountability

Social Watch, a network that today has members in over 60 countries around the world, was created in 1995 as a “meeting place for non-governmental organizations concerned with social development and gender discrimination” responding to the need to promote the political will required for making the United Nations promises come true. Since then, this network, which is continually growing both qualitatively and quantitatively, has published 13 yearly reports on progress and setbacks in the struggle against poverty and for gender equality, which 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 13th, the *Social Watch Report* has brought into light more than 550 reports from civil society organizations, all of them sharing the 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 59 national organizations - a record figure so far - sustains the flame 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, the eradication of poverty and gender equality 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 the persons 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 No. 0, published in 1996, featured contributions from 13 organizations; since then, the network has been steadily rising. Currently,

Social Watch has members (‘watchers’) in over 60 countries around the world, and membership grows each year.

## 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 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 original flexibility and openness.

In addition to national coalitions, the network is structured around three bodies: the General

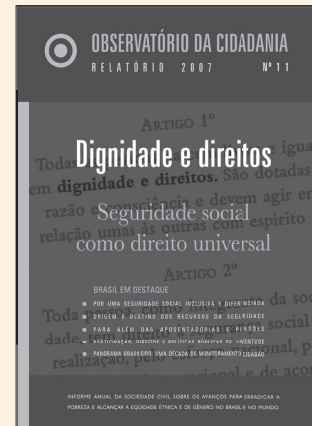
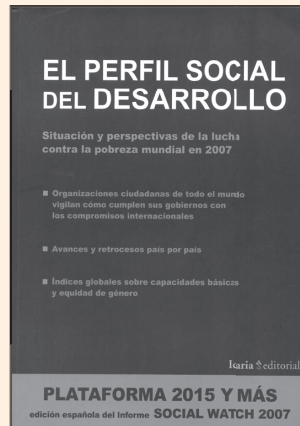
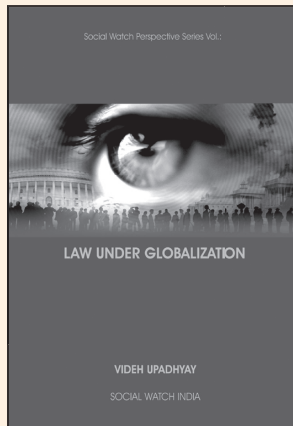
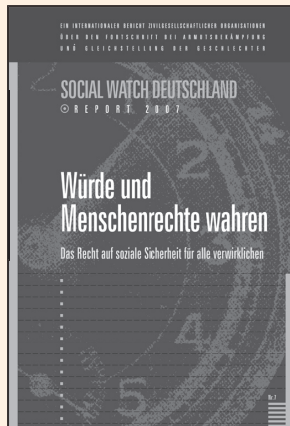
Assembly, the Coordinating Committee and the International Secretariat. In recent years, some regional and sub-regional coordination structures were established as a space for articulation – not as a necessary intermediate body to link the national with the global.

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 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.

## 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.

NOTA: The Memorandum of Understanding was adopted during the 1st General Assembly, Rome, 2000. Available from: <[www.socialwatch.org/en/acercaDe/asambleaRoma.htm](http://www.socialwatch.org/en/acercaDe/asambleaRoma.htm)>.



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. Since the international Social Watch report can only devote a couple of pages to each country and is only available in English and Spanish, the local coalitions publish more extensive national reports in national languages in Benin, Brazil, Germany, India, Italy, the Philippines, and the Arab region.

### General Assembly

The General 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. It takes place every three years and up to now has been held three times: in Rome 2000, Beirut 2003 and Sofia 2006.<sup>1</sup> 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.

### 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 communications, 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,"<sup>2</sup> 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, the function of the Secretariat being to support and implement the strategic decisions made.

### 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, promotion of the network and its representation in international forums.

### The local, the global and the Report

Every year Social Watch chooses to analyze a different subject in depth through its Report, usually focusing on topics 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 a local perspective, reporting on the state of affairs in their countries in relation to each year's specific theme.

In addition, Social Watch has produced 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.

Although members use the document for advocacy work in diverse situations, Report launches are

key opportunities for dissemination of its contents, taking place both in relevant spaces of international and national debate and decision-making. Launches are high-profile spaces for the local coalitions to address the media on national issues and to discuss their findings and alternative proposals with policy-makers.

Occasional Papers are published, mainly to help build the capacity of member coalitions,<sup>3</sup> regional training workshops have been organized, and position papers have been produced. 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. ■

### References

- Friedlander, E. and Adams, B. (2006). *Social Watch External Evaluation 2001-2005*. Available at: <www.socialwatch.org/en/noticias/documentos/SW\_Evaluation\_report.doc>.
- Hessini, L. and Nayar, A. (2000). *A Movement Toward Social Justice. An Evaluation Report*. Strategic Analysis for Gender Equity (SAGE). New York. Available at: <www.socialwatch.org/en/acercaDe/evaluacion.htm>.
- Social Watch No. 0 (1996). *The Starting Point*. Instituto del Tercer Mundo. Montevideo. Available at: <www.socialwatch.org/en/informelmpreso/informe1996.htm>.
- Social Watch (2006). *Strategy and Framework of Activities 2007-2009*. Available at: <www.socialwatch.org/en/noticias/documentos/cambiarSW\_Strategy\_Framework\_2007-2009.doc>.
- Van Reisen, M. (2001). *The Lion's Teeth. The Prehistory of Social Watch*. Instituto del Tercer Mundo. Montevideo. Available at: <www.socialwatch.org/en/informelmpreso/imagenes/otrasPublicaciones/ZOOM-01-eng.pdf>

3 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 Artaaga, *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. Occasional Papers available at: <www.socialwatch.org/en/informelmpreso/cuadernosOcasionales.htm>.

1 Final reports, working papers and other materials from these three Assemblies available at: <www.socialwatch.org>

2 The document describing the nature and mandate of the Coordinating Committee was agreed at the 2nd General Assembly, Beirut 2003. Available from: <www.socialwatch.org/en/acercaDe/beirut/documentos/SW\_PrinciplesCC.doc>