SUMMARY OF THE 13th SESSION OF THE JOINT NGO BRIEFING SERIES

9 October 2014

International Geneva Perception Change Project

Alessandra Vellucci, Chief, Press and External Relations Section of the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, chaired the briefing, during which presentations were given by Carolina Rodriguez, Head, International Geneva Perception Change Project, Charlotte L. Warakaulle, Chief, Political Affairs and Partnerships Section, and Hamish Jenkins, Senior Programme Officer at the United Nations Non-governmental Liaison Service.

CAROLINA RODRIGUEZ, Head, International Geneva Perception Change Project, presented the project, which had been initiated by the Acting Director-General of UNOG, who believed that the overall understanding of what was being accomplished by International Geneva was not well known and that much more could be done to promote the effect this work had on the world in poor, war-torn and wealthy countries. The three main themes of the project were Peace, Rights and Well-Being.

The Perception Change Project was to be carried out at three levels:

- Working with the media – 21 countries (main donors and several other countries);
- Working with academia, in partnership with the Graduate Institute;
- Working with individuals, focussing on tourists experience.

Some organizations of the International Geneva did not have enough visibility. The idea was that, with the synergy of some 40 partners in the city, all parts of the International Geneva would benefit from increased media coverage.

On the media front, some of the activities included very active social media channels, “speed dating” of International Geneva partners with visiting journalists, the TEDxPlaceDesNations event on 11 December, etc. It was really important that all partners, international, local and non-governmental, share common messaging.

The social media handles for the Perception Change Project were: @GenevaImpact, #Genevameans..., #GenevaImpact.

CHARLOTTE L. WARAKAULLE, Chief, Political Affairs and Partnerships Section, stressed the collective nature of the Perception Change Project.

She also flagged two issues, both of them following on from the Acting Director-General’s interaction with the NGO community in January 2014.

The Acting Director-General had earlier mentioned his interest in engaging NGOs in relation to the Conference on Disarmament. He had continued to work on this issue, and would host a Civil Society Forum on the Conference on Disarmament, to take place on 12 December in Room XX [subsequently postponed to first quarter of 2015]. It would be a one-day event and its structure was now under discussion. The Civil Society Forum would provide a good opportunity for those NGOs who were active in the area of Disarmament to interact with Member States on an issue where there was usually very limited engagement with civil society.
The Acting Director-General hoped that that could also be an opportunity to highlight how valuable civil society input would be in the disarmament debates. Any NGOs with a particular interest in that area should let Ms. Warakaulle know, so that they could be kept posted on the Forum.

Another NGO briefing with the Acting Director-General was being planned before the end of the year, with the view to looking at the challenges ahead. The date was still to be determined, but early to mid-December looked likely. If there were particular issues that NGOs would like the Acting Director-General to consider or address, they should inform Ms. Warakaulle in advance.

Finally, Ms. Warakaulle informed that on Sunday, 12 October, the Palais des Nations would be opening its park for a training for the Escalade race in December. Participants could run or walk 2, 5 or 8 km. The meeting point was at the Place des Nations at 9.45 a.m.

HAMISH JENKINS, Senior Programme Officer at the United Nations Non-governmental Liaison Service (UN-NGLS), said that in July the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which was composed of 30 seats shared by 70 Member States, had adopted a proposal to be submitted to the General Assembly. The proposal contained 17 sustainable development goals, and the next stage would be for the wider community of UN Member States to consider and enrich the proposals. The SDG’s agenda was much more ambitious than the MDGs. It was universal in scope, addressing concerns affecting both rich and poor countries, while maintaining the eradication of poverty at the top of the agenda. Mr. Jenkins stressed the extraordinary participatory nature of the Open Working Group, noting that many civil society organizations had stated that what had been agreed should be treated as the floor rather than the ceiling of what should be agreed at the development summit of September 2015.

Mr. Jenkins informed that the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing had held its fifth and final plenary session in New York from 4 to 8 August 2014. At the end of the session, the Committee had adopted its final report proposing options on an effective sustainable development financing strategy. The latter had then been presented to the General Assembly in September 2014, as mandated by the Rio+20 Outcome Document.

Mr. Jenkins explained that the Committee’s work had been a closed process of 30 experts, who had been nominated by the different UN regional groups, but various non-state actors had still been able to channel their expertise throughout the work of the Committee. A comprehensive 48-page document had been produced (a summary prepared by UN-NGLS had been made available during the briefing). The Committee had assessed the financial needs of the transition to sustainable development, which were enormous. The total amount of global public and private savings were sufficient to meet these needs, but would require substantive changes at domestic and international levels in the ability of the public sector to mobilize resources, as well as new regulations and incentives to redirect private finance towards long-term investments in sustainable development. The Committee proposed strategies to tackle harmful tax competition among countries, eliminating tax havens, among other proposals. It also saw the United Nations as the appropriate body to ensure greater policy coherence between the sustainable development agenda and policies of international financial institutions. The final document was intended to be an input to preparations of the Third International
Conference on Financing for Development (FfD) to take place in July 2015. Both the negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda and FfD will be informed by a synthesis report of the UN Secretary-General, which will be released toward the end of November 2014.

DEBATE

An NGO representative quoted former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who said that “the United Nations should be united”; there was frequently a feeling that the SDG negotiations were exclusively a New York activity. For that reason, a suggestion was made to hold a special session dedicated to the SDGs at UNOG in order to bring people up to speed in Geneva. Such a session would also draw attention to UN’s 70th anniversary. The Conference of NGOs (CoNGO) was also considering holding events in New York, Geneva and Vienna, as the UN’s 70th anniversary should be about shared values.

Another participant commented that Geneva should indeed have an important role, and more meetings ought to be held here, in the cradle of the United Nations. Every year, some USD 1.5 trillion was going to military expenditures, which was exactly the money which was missing from sustainable development. The promotion of an arms-free society was an answer to that solution.

Asked about the rationales of the Perception Change Project, and measuring its impact, Ms. Rodriguez said that there was a series of objectives to be achieved. One was reaching broader understanding of UN work among public at large. Another was targeting decision-makers in capitals of the main donor countries, who should believe that they are getting their money’s worth by supporting International Geneva. For Switzerland, it was also very important that the International Geneva was well recognized.

Ms. Rodriguez explained that the first activity was to develop a media matrix, with the pro bono help of Media Tenor, a company from Zurich. The focus was on how issues related to International Geneva were being reported in the media, who was writing about the UN, etc. Changing the perception of ordinary people was also important, which was why there would be surveys among people at the airport and those visiting the UN through guided tours. A bus tour organized by the Fondation pour Genève and promoting International Geneva would take place across Switzerland in spring 2015.

One of the main objectives would be breaking down the silos between different organizations, but also between International Geneva and local Geneva.

Ms. Warakaulle said that efforts were being made to have an event on SDGs, with Special Adviser Amina Mohammed’s participation. Another idea was to have a series of symposiums on relations between the UN and civil society, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary. Ms. Warakaulle agreed that the UN was very serious about military spending, which amounted to USD 1.7 trillion today, and reminded that the first General Assembly resolution had been about disarmament.

Mr. Jenkins said that it was not only important to ensure that the Geneva international community be better informed on New York-centred process, but also how Geneva could step up its influence in 2015. For example, if human rights are supposed to be one of the foundations of the post-2015 development agenda, ways ought to be found to better
channel Geneva-based expertise to New York, and civil society could help facilitate the dialogue in that regard.

Ms. Vellucci reminded that the World Investment Forum would be taking place the following week, where NGOs would also be given a chance to be heard.

An NGO representative stated that a key message in the Perception Change Project should be that Geneva was well placed for partnering activities, and a thematic approach should be applied for partnering and implementation of the 2015 agenda. Groups should be able to come and talk about what they could do to promote the process. People could contribute their ideas and partnering possibilities.

Another participant reminded that during the term of former Director-General Vladimir Petrovsky, there had been many initiatives involving civil society, which had felt involved and engaged then. Since then, it seemed that NGOs were not doing a lot, and they were also all in their own silos. Bringing on board NGOs through the Perception Change Project would give them a chance to present their views on and promote the International Geneva. Member States ought to be aware of the importance of financing NGOs: NGOs had to be able to speak out in Geneva.

On questions how the Perception Change Project would collect evidence of success and what would be done with it, Ms. Rodriguez said that she and her team were collecting examples and trying to figure out what the best ways of communicating would be. The Acting Director-General, along with the heads of CERN and Interpeace, was blogging on Huffington Post, for example. The team was currently working on a cookbook, bringing together Geneva success stories in a lighter fashion. Each specific project had its target audience. It was also important to collect evidence on how the work of the International Geneva was affecting the life of Swiss citizens. Ms. Rodriguez emphasized that the project was meant to nurture ideas, connect people, see what was sustainable, and create a network with a common voice. Ms. Warakaulle added that Geneva would have an even greater importance once the SDGs had been agreed, and the implementation stage had started.

An NGO representative stated that it had to be borne in mind that no single State was providing as much help and assistance as NGOs. NGOs should thus be given a dedicated day.

Mr. Jenkins said that the most important thing was the implementation of the future goals, for which Geneva could be a hub at multiple levels, including in developing multistakeholder partnerships. Among these, partnerships with social and solidarity economy actors would be a promising way to promote economic activities that seek to meet social and environmental objectives, transforming economies north and south.

A participant informed that an event to mark Beijing + 20 would take place in Geneva on 3-5 November.

Ms. Vellucci informed that 17 October was the International Day of Poverty Eradication, which would be marked with an event jointly organized with the NGO Fourth World. On 16 October, the film “The Children of Troumaron” would be shown with the participation of the author.

The date of the next NGO briefing would be subsequently decided and communicated.