



OPEN UN: ONE PERSON, ONE VOICE

On September 13 2005, Bridge Initiative International (in association with many NGOs, listed below) was responsible for putting together OPEN UN, a special civil-society event that took place at Riverside Church, to which official participants of the UN Summit were invited, and came, to attend and to dialogue with civil society.

Here is the speech which was pronounced by Patrice Barrat .

In many ways, the reasons that led to OPEN UN – OPEN UNITED NATIONS – were quite simple ...: an obvious need to fill a vacuum around the UN Summit, a desire to give people around the planet the feeling that their voice could eventually be heard beyond their own governments, and subsequently, last and least, a desire to give myself a chance not to feel powerless

FILLING A VACUUM

We first thought of OPEN UN in December 2004, during the Bridge Initiative Plenary meeting held at UNESCO in Paris, when we heard that the Summit that was due to take place in September 2005 in New York would be mostly closed to the forces and voices of civil society.

It seemed quite amazing that after years and decades of high interaction with NGOs, the United Nations would end up organizing what some called its most important summit in this manner.

So, rather than trying to push for one, two, or ten delegates within the Summit, we wished try the opposite: to hold a civil-society event where UN or government officials who cared enough could come to listen and to dialogue.

We spoke to a number of NGOs that we often interact with and they sounded supportive. To be accurate, some – quite conventional ones – said: “Why call it OPEN UN? Isn't the UN open by nature?”

We met with the UN Secretariat, which seemed to accept, even like the idea. They clearly need the support of civil society.

Then we were told about Riverside Church as a possible venue. And I must say that a time when the values of religion are mostly being used by certain politicians or the media to promote conservatism, it felt good to be in Riverside Church for OPEN UN.

Something else made us happy along the way, which was to see how so many organizations from different backgrounds managed to agree on this civil-society forum. I believe that OPEN UN owes a lot to the wisdom of the IPS (Institute for Policy Studies) for that.

Further information and registration: www.openun.org
Contact: info@bridge-initiative.org



I have to say that there is a critical need for this type of joint work, joint planning, and joint discussion among NGOs and organizations.

Then perhaps certain organizations would stop acting as if the goal of their struggle was only to strengthen their own organization or as if the goal was the struggle in itself and not to change people's lives for the better, here and now ...

ONE PERSON, ONE VOICE?

The Powers that Be need to lend a more frequent ear to the anxieties or anger people seem to share around the planet, including in the US itself.

We are worried that the UN Summit might just reveal that the way the world is currently being governed – on the basis of an architecture inherited from World War II – is leading to paralysis. Most governments act as if they were now merely prisoners of national election rounds, while internationally, they seem to be stuck in horse-trading among themselves.

At the end of this year 2005, we might realize that the G-8 Summit, the UN Summit, the World Summit on the Information Society in Tunisia, the WTO Summit in Hong Kong, are just not working, not delivering anything.

The gap between the rich and the poor, between religions and cultures, and between international institutions/governments and the people they are supposed to represent might then appear to have grown even more.

If we want the challenges humankind is facing to be addressed, it has become obvious that people must feel that their own participation matters. OPEN UN could be one small step in the direction of ONE PERSON, ONE VOICE.

For us, at Bridge Initiative International, it is essential to support and open a political and public space for other voices to be heard.

In the last five years, we managed to do so by setting up the conditions for dialog with officials who do care about finding sources of inspiration and reinforcing counter-powers.

Beyond the street protests, such dialog has been a way for the media to actually pay attention to the content of the protest.

Perhaps today, here and now, symbolizes the beginning of a new age, in which civil society can continue to interact in different ways with the official agendas but could also start developing its own, autonomous approaches. It is also true that the NGO community is suffering from consultation fatigue. People, however, men and women, the young and the not-so-young, are probably truly hungry for an opportunity to express themselves, to take part, locally and globally, in how their future is designed, to feel that their destiny can be in their own hands.

This task is a duty that we all have, making sure each person has a voice and that this voice can be heard.

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“POWERWITHNESS”

In the end, why would I want my own voice to be heard?

Because, like millions of people, I cannot stand feeling powerless and I would like to generate and share something like “powerwithness”.

As a journalist and filmmaker for 29 years, I have been feeling increasingly powerless. I have seen with my own eyes the major media going tabloid, stupid, or just plain deceitful.

I have seen with my own eyes in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Vietnam, Lebanon, Algeria, Northern Ireland, Nicaragua, Bosnia, and in Other America, as Michael Harrington called it, poverty, civil wars, wars, refugees, and famine. Or just people losing their jobs and not finding a new one, then losing their dignity.

So, in the name of the people I have seen dying or surviving, I need to find a strong amplifier for their memories or for their voices.

Now, I have been lucky. When I was a child, my parents showed me what values to care for: respect for others, whatever their color, their religion, or their rank in society. My parents, Denise and Robert, were imprisoned in France because they supported decolonization movements in North Africa, Africa, and Indochina.

I must say that today, when trying to educate my own children, it is very difficult to compete with the values conveyed by the media or by the political elite. These values seem to be based on fear or on a form of colonization of the minds.

I do not want my children to live in fear nor to be colonized.

Patrice Barrat

Founder and Executive Director
Bridge Initiative International

More at:

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In association with: Action Aid, Africa Action, Democracy Now, Global Call for Action Against Poverty (GCAP), the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the International Forum on Globalization (IFG), the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), Peaceful Tomorrows, Solidarity Africa, TransAfrica, United for Peace and Justice, the Youth Coalition, the World Federalist Movement and 50 Years Is Enough.

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