**Contribution of Conectas Human Rights to the report of the High Commissioner "Civil society space in multilateral institutions"**

Conectas Human Rights is pleased to contribute to the High Commissioner report on "Civil society space in multilateral institutions". In this contribution, we will share good practices of civil society engagement with multilateral institutions such as the webcasting of sessions of the NGO Committee and, in a broader sense of participation and engagement with multilateral institutions, the experience of videoconferences with the Brazilian government before and after Human Rights Council and Inter-American Commission on Human Rights sessions.

- **Videoconferences with the Brazilian government**

In the past years, Brazil has rose its international profile and increased its participation and leadership in global debates. Nonetheless, Brazilian foreign policy remains a realm of little transparency and accountability. The ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE or Itamaraty) has a traditional monopole over foreign policy questions, usually dealt in a poorly democratic way, in an opaque participative way. The country has no White Paper on foreign policy, official information available on the Ministry's website is scarce, and there is no formal participative channel or mechanism for civil society to systematically engage with. In regards to human rights, Brazil has an active foreign policy, mostly at the UN-level. But this activism is inconsistent and unpredictable. It is highly common for rights groups inside the country to be surprised by Brazilian votes and positions at the UNHRC or the Inter-American System, with limited public accountability either before or after the acts.

To counter that, in 2006, Conectas and others form the Brazilian Committee on Human Rights and Foreign Policy - a multi-stakeholder platform comprised of CSOs, Brazilian government bodies and authorities such as the Human Rights and Foreign Relations Committees of both the House of Representatives and the Senate, and the Federal Prosecutor for Citizen Rights of the General Prosecutor's Office (PFDC/MPF, from its acronym in Portuguese) .

Since then, the Committee was able to promote significant amount of debate around this topic, notably through annual hearings at the Congress, during the Brazilian UPR (in 2008, 2012 and 2017), and during Presidential Elections (2010 and 2014). Despite those achievements, dialogue between civil society and foreign policy decision makers remains ad hoc, issue based and very depend on the good will of those holding key positions within governmental bodies.

In order to create a periodic dialogue around Brazilian positions in international human rights fora, the Committee has proposed in 2014 the set-up of videoconferences between its members, expanded to other organizations and to academics since then, and the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE or Itamaraty) and the Presidency's Human Rights Secretariat (SDH). Those videoconeferences happen 6 (six) times a year, before and after the 3 (three) UNHRC annual sessions. As such, they allow for previous discussion around priorities as well as public accountability for positions taken. Videoconferences are held using the General Prosecutor's Office (MPF) system, which has an outreach in potentially every state-level capital.

Videoconferences are an innovative tool, because they represent one of the few periodic participatory mechanisms currently under way in the Brazilian foreign policy. Moreover, through this virtual tool provided for by PFDC/MPF we are contributing to democratize access to policy dialogue spaces between with the MRE. The system allows for gathering - simultaneously – participants residing in multiple cities of Brazil (nowadays in average 5 cities, but this number could grow with future demands coming from other places) at a low cost and without carbon emissions.

After three years we can say we manage to secure government's commitment on this initiative, notably from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is particularly true when it comes to the MFA's Human Rights Division, in the person of the Division's head. This will be an agenda with which we will continue working throughout the year 2016, and beyond, increasing our dissemination efforts and our pressure for the practice to be formally institutionalized.

In terms of impacts, this videoconferences are, first of all, a space for agenda setting, space for CSOs to get first-hand information from government officials (such as ongoing negotiations on UN-experts in-country visits, or pending IAHRC public hearings requests done by the Brazilian government). They also provide for an opportunity to raise the political cost of decisions contrary to human rights or impacting on human rights, improving public sector accountability on FP&HR related topics. Finally, they are also a window of opportunity to mobilize other State actors beyond the MFA such as the HR Secretariat and some state-based Federal Prosecutors. Beyond that, we can also list some issued-based concrete gains, such as making the case for the need of a sustained national dialogue on the new treaty on Transnational Corporation and Human Rights, and advancing inter-ministerial coordination in regards to complying with international human rights systems requirements (UN Special Rapporteur visits and Inter-American Human Rights Court inspections).

- **Webcasting sessions of the NGO Committee**

The United Nations Economic and Social Council approved, on April 19 2017, a resolution that requires the meetings of the UN Committee on NGOs to be broadcast live on the internet. The resolution presented by Chile, Mexico and Uruguay received 37 votes in favor – including by Brazil – 16 abstentions and no votes against.

Calls for more transparency in the Committee have been made frequently by many organizations, including Conectas.[1] Formed by 19 countries with four-year terms that are renewable indefinitely, the Committee has some members that are averse to more participation by civil society. States such as Russia, China, Cuba, Iran, Pakistan and India have all tried to block the accreditation of NGOs that are more critical of their governments.

As the body that represents the doorway for civil society to the UN, this measure is a good first step towards greater transparency and ending the political reprisals that restrict the work of various organizations in their countries. We hope that new resolutions open the body even

[1] "More interaction necessary" available at: http://www.conectas.org/en/actions/foreign-policy/news/49375-more-interaction-necessary

further to outside participation, facilitating the accreditation process for NGOs that have few resources and permitting them to make public statements.

In January, a representative of Conectas was barred[2] from speaking in the Committee. The statement planned by the organization would have criticized the lack of transparency in the body and stressed the importance of civil society for the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015.

[2] "No voice in the UN" available at: http://www.conectas.org/en/actions/foreign-policy/news/47066-no-voice-in-the-un