

# UN World Summits and **Civil Society** Engagement

## Rio de Janeiro

This workshop brought together researchers from Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe to discuss the theoretical and methodological frameworks and the research questions for a new UNRISD project on UN World Summits and Civil Society Engagement. The project, which got under way in mid-2003, assesses the impact of a range of United-Nations-sponsored events on civil society activism. Research is being carried out in three countries that hosted summits—Brazil, China and South Africa—and three that hosted summit preparatory meetings (or PrepComs)—Chile, Indonesia and Senegal. A number of thematic studies have also been commissioned under the project.

The methodological workshop was held to establish a common framework for research that would ensure consistency between the case studies while allowing for a diversity of national contexts. The discussions regarding theoretical and methodological issues concentrated on definitions of concepts, and achieving a balance between national and international levels of analysis.

Participants agreed on a definition that characterizes civil society as a political and ideological rather than “technical” concept: a complex and dynamic social arena, with individuals and groups organized in various forms of associations and networks in order to express their views and fulfil their interests. Civil society can thus comprise anything from a global advocacy movement down to a village self-help group. The structures and forms of civil society, the relations between civil society and the state, those within civil society, and even those between civil societies are constantly evolving and changing. Such a conceptualization of

civil society—as process oriented—is particularly apt for this project, which analyses the historical evolution and current shape of civil society in order to identify changes in civil society that may be traced to a particular UN-sponsored event.

### Countries—Summits

#### *Brazil*

- United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992

#### *China*

- Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995

#### *South Africa*

- World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, 2001
- World Summit on Sustainable Development, 2002

### Countries—PrepComs

#### *Chile*

- World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance—Regional PrepCom for the Americas, 2002

#### *Indonesia*

- World Summit on Sustainable Development—PrepCom IV, 2002

#### *Senegal*

- Fourth World Conference on Women—Fifth African Regional Conference on Women, 1994

During the workshop, the researchers identified a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods that would be used, including surveys, interviews, case studies, and the extensive use of primary and secondary documentation. The following framework questions were identified at the workshop and are guiding the national-level research.

1. What was the impact of hosting the summit/PrepCom on the issue in the national context?
2. What was the impact of hosting the summit/PrepCom on the structure of relations in civil society?
  - Who does/does not participate and why?
  - Were new networks/alliances formed?
  - Have the forms of association changed?
  - What was the influence of donors?
  - Have civil society actions changed?
3. What was the impact of hosting the summit/PrepCom on civil society relations...
  - With the state/party apparatus?
  - Among civil society organizations/actors themselves?
  - With the public?
  - Between national and global civil society?
4. What was the impact on national political space?

Research under this project will take place through December 2004. Funding for this project is provided by the Ford Foundation and UNRISD core funds.