Social Watch: Monitoring from the grassroots

To promote the political will needed for United Nations promises to become a reality, Social Watch was created in 1995 by a group of civil society organizations, with the aim of reminding governments of their commitments and independently tracking their implementation, country by country and at the international level. Since then, Social Watch has published a yearly report on progress and setbacks in the struggle against poverty and for gender equality, and today the network has members in over 70 countries on every continent.

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Social Watch Secretariat

Origins

During the last decade of the 20th century, after the end of the Cold War, a series of high-level United Nations conferences, starting with the 'Children's Summit' in 1990 and ending with the Millennium Summit in 2000,[1] redefined the global social agenda, in parallel with the reformulation of the global economy through the process of reforms usually known as globalization. In 1995, the Social Summit (Copenhagen) and Women's Conference (Beijing) defined the eradication of poverty and gender equality as common universal objectives for the first time, setting concrete targets and timelines to achieve the goal vaguely formulated in 1946 in the UN Charter as "dignity for all", the third common aspiration of humanity – peace and human rights being the other two. To promote the political will needed for those promises to become a reality, Social Watch was created in 1995 by a group of civil society organizations, with the aim of reminding governments of their commitments and independently tracking their implementation, country by country and at the international level.

Since then, Social Watch has published a yearly report on 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 network now has members ('watchers') in over 70 countries on every continent. These national Social Watch coalitions regularly remind governments of their commitments and contribute alternative proposals based on an informed analysis of the situation and in close consultation with the grassroots.

The creation of Social Watch was an attempt to rectify the lack of accountability mechanisms to ensure compliance with international commitments around social policies or development goals and reflected

[1] World Summit for Children (WSC), New York, 1990; United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio de Janeiro, 1992; World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, 1993; International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), Cairo, 1994; World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 1995; Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), Beijing, 1995; Millennium Summit, New York, 2000.


Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, presented with a copy of the Social Watch India report on 4 July 2007, commented that "institutions such as Social Watch are important to monitor governance and provide constructive feedback to the government."

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.

The Memorandum of Understanding was adopted during the 1st General Assembly, Rome, 2000. Available from: <www.socialwatch.org/en/acercaDe/asambleaRoma.htm>.
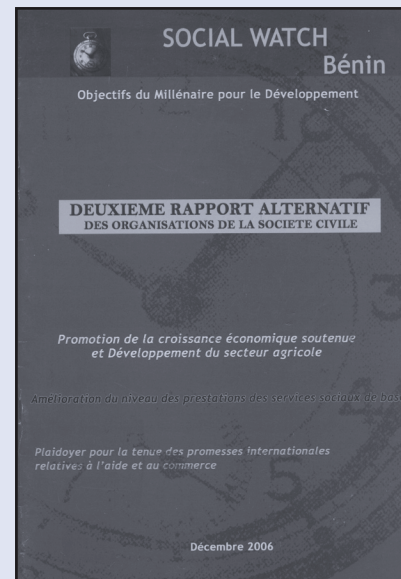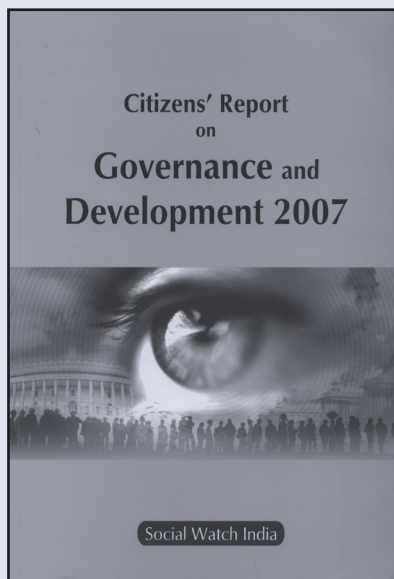
a period in which civil society organizations were beginning to systematically use the new information technologies to broaden the reach of their advocacy work (Van Reisen, 2001, p. 44).

At that time, international monitoring by independent organizations already existed in several areas, and successful experiences, like that of Amnesty International in the field of human rights, were a source of inspiration for the watchers. The Social Watch yearly reports 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 (Batliwala, 2007).

From its beginnings, Social Watch was conceived not as a new institution but as a "meeting place for non-governmental organizations concerned about social development and gender discrimination" (Social Watch No. 0, 1996). Based on the idea that progress towards agreed goals can be measured, a tool was designed for the presentation of internationally available statistical information, while at the same time reporting on qualitative aspects of the issues addressed through analyses undertaken by social organizations working at a national level.

> The Social Watch annual report should become a working system aimed at empowering civil societies and local communities… This will be done by adding an international dimension to the efforts and campaigns they are already engaging in domestically, and by providing opportunities to share their experiences and methodologies with similar groups at an international level. (Social Watch No. 0, 1996)

From its creation in 1996 up to the present day that "meeting place" has grown and several aspects of it have evolved, but its founding ideas and objectives have remained.

A flexible network

In preparing for their participation in the Copenhagen Social Summit, civil society organizations adopted flexible and ad hoc organizational forms. Contrary to the experience in other international processes, no formal governing structure or steering committee was created and no stable coordinating group was established. Instead, 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.[2] 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 they created maintains much of the flexibility and openness of the process that it originated from.

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 have been established, but those are seen as a space for articulation and not 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 by-laws. Instead, a short Memorandum of Understanding between national groups and the Social Watch network became the basic framework establishing mutual expectations, with respect for the autonomy of the 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 a strong sense of ownership over the network by the members, which has been emphasized by the two external evaluations carried out up to now.

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. In Brazil, for example, Social Watch functions through a reference group of several social organizations united around various national issues. In Tanzania, the national platform operates through focal points centred on community group leaders and aims to foster grassroots involvement. The case of Thailand is very different, with a central group of five or six organizations working in close collaboration, while in India the network has grown so much that they produce their own detailed national report, brought to the Prime Minister in a publicly broadcast ceremony, plus state-level reports in several units of the federation. Since the international Social Watch report can only devote a couple of pages to each country, and is only available in English and Spanish, more extensive national reports are published by the local coalitions in national languages in Benin, Brazil, Germany, India, Italy and the Philippines. A report for the Arab region is published in Lebanon by the Arab NGO Network for Development.

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 this space that serves as a decision-making forum. However, it is also a space for recreating the sense of belonging and strengthening the network's identity and unity. It takes place every three years

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2   Roberto Bissio (commentary on the case study *The Social Watch Case*, by S. Blatiwala, 2007, soon to be published).
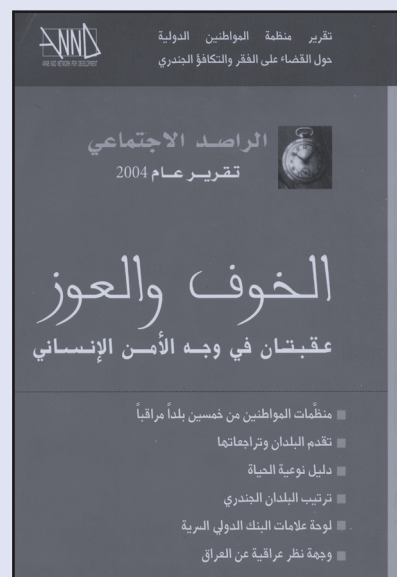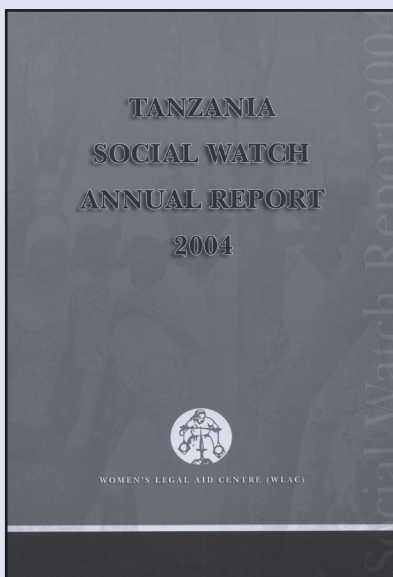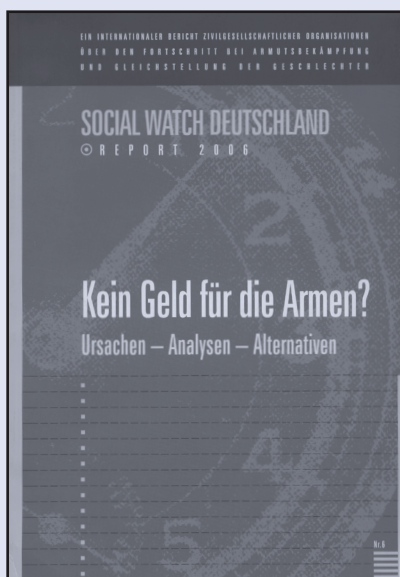
and up to now has been held three times: in Rome in 2000, Beirut in 2003 and Sofia in 2006.[3] Long-term members of the network who have taken part i in all of the assemblies identify these three events as respectively forming, consolidating and maturing the network. In addition to setting medium- and 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 is the key political body for the 'daily' work of the network, the Secretariat being its main executive body. This organizational structure requires fluid communications, facilitated principally through an email list, plus biannual meetings in person and regular telephone conferences generally arranged to discuss specific issues.

As the Coordinating Committee's task is to "ensure the political visibility and participation of the network in relevant spaces and processes,"[4] its composition endeavours to represent a geographical and gender balance as well as considering the contribution that members can make to the whole network in terms of experience and capabilities. The Coordinating Committee's decisions have always been adopted by consensus so far. All decisions (and discussions) are reported to watchers via the distribution of the minutes for each actual or virtual meeting of the Committee. The permanent participation of two Secretariat members as ad hoc members of the Coordinating Committee ensures coordination between the two bodies, the function of the

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

4   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>

Secretariat being to support and implement the strategic determinations and decisions made.

International Secretariat

The first external evaluation of Social Watch (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.

From the local to the global

The Social Watch annual report has grown from including contributions from 13 organizations in 1996 to an average of 50 national reports in recent years. There are currently watchers in more than 70 countries and membership continues to grow every year.

The first stage in the production of the Report is the choice of its central theme. While constantly monitoring anti-poverty and gender policies, every year the Report analyzes a different subject in depth, usually one that is related to issues under discussion on the international agenda. Experts from different origins and disciplines contribute complementary and alternative views on the issues through thematic articles. This international perspective is complemented with the preparation of national and regional reports through which network member organizations contribute a local perspective, reporting on the state of affairs in their countries in relation to each year's specific theme. Consequently, the choice of

Prof. Leonor Briones, member of the Social Watch Coordinating Committee, addressed the heads of state and government on behalf of civil society at the UN World Summit on 14 September 2005.
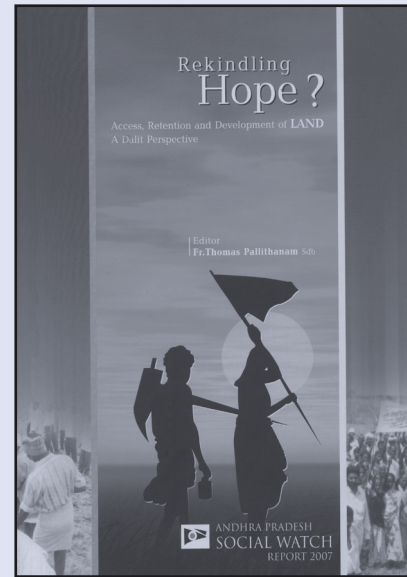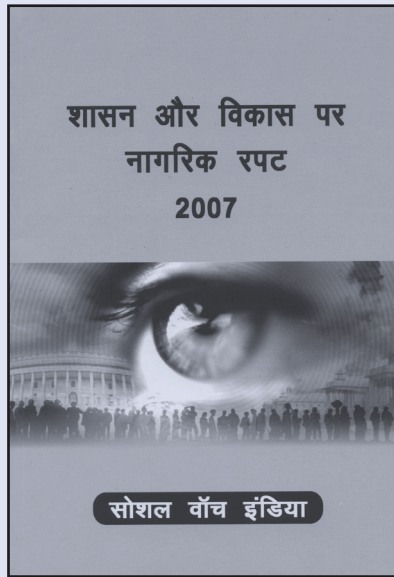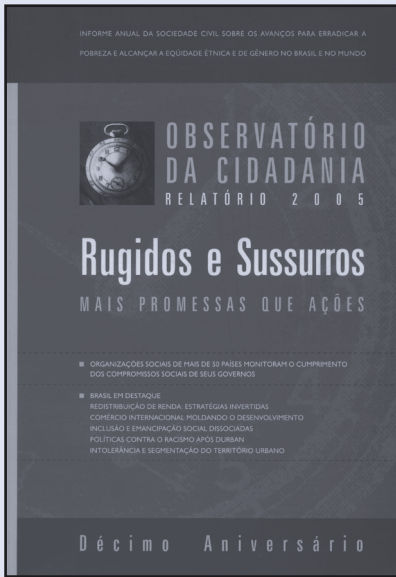
theme depends on the possibility of addressing it from a local perspective.

The idea of linking global and national levels also figures strongly in the production of indexes and tables where comparable international information is provided that presents a macro-perspective of the situation in 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.

Although members use the report for advocacy work in diverse situations, report launches are key opportunities for dissemination and they take place not only in relevant spaces of international debate but also in each country, where much of the attention is focused on that country's results. Launches are an opportunity for the local coalitions to address the media on national issues and to discuss their findings and alternative proposals with policy-makers.

In addition Occasional Papers are published, mainly to help build the capacity of member coalitions,[5] 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 inter-governmental bodies on behalf of the network or wider civil society constituencies. ∎

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5   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 Arteaga, *Control Ciudadano desde la base*, analyzes the democratization of international human rights instruments experience in Chile in 1997. The third of these publications, 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. Two new Occasional Papers will be published in 2007. One will present experiences and systematizations in advocacy issues and the other will address monitoring and the use of social indicators. Both publications are based on the results of capacity-building and practice exchange workshops organized during 2007 with the support of Oxfam Novib/KIC in countries of Francophone Africa and Asia. Occasional Papers are available from: <www.socialwatch.org/en/informeImpreso/cuadernosOcasionales.htm>.