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**Accountability Abroad: Southern NGOs and their Government'
International Human Rights Policies**

Monday, July 21, 2008, 3:15 – 4:45pm

Facilitator:

Jarrett Blanc, Senior Policy Analyst for Multilateral, Open Society Institute

Panelists:

Ted Piccone, Senior Fellow & Deputy Director (Foreign Policy), The Brookings Institution

Lucia Nader, Conectas Direitos Humanos

Jarrett Blanc introduced the session by arguing that the UN Human Rights Council (“Council”) is an accurate reflection of the member states of the UN, but that many states, including a number of democracies in the “global south,” have more progressive human rights policies at home than abroad. He suggested that this provides an opportunity for southern NGOs to advocate for their government to take more progressive action at the international level, and he concluded that a similar model could be used beyond the Council.

Ted Piccone suggested that there is the possibility of a democratization of foreign policy, including a greater role for NGOs both at international organizations and in setting their governments’ agendas, including by raising human rights issues. He then reviewed a history of the Council, suggesting that the “painful” negotiations over its formation created both challenges and opportunities. The percentage of democratic members of the Council has increased, but has apparently been counteracted so far by powerful regional and interest blocs, such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). The Council seems less able to use some tools, such as condemnatory resolutions, but it has new resources such as the ability to call special sessions.

Piccone covered the history of Council membership and leadership elections, highlighting the defeat of Belarus in 2007 and Sri Lanka in 2008 by transnational NGO advocacy. He also described the campaign to prevent Egypt from taking the Presidency of the Council in 2008, which succeeded, leading to the current Nigerian Presidency.

He described the special procedures authorized by the Council to address thematic or country specific mandates as the “crown jewel” of the UN human rights system and stressed the importance of their independence. He described the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) as a work in progress. Piccone argued that U.S. non-engagement in the Council’s work has hurt its formative years.

Piccone concluded by suggesting that not enough empirical research has been done on the work of the HRC and suggesting several avenues for future policy work.

Lucia Nader described the work of her organization, Conectas Direitos Humanos, and the evolution of their efforts on foreign policy issues. She argued that southern NGO advocacy is important both for its domestic effects, such as increasing government transparency, and because it is important to improving international organization. The “south” contains 80% of the world’s population, and southern governments are already using their influence to shape the global agenda, if not always in a progressive way. She described the importance of southern NGOs developing their own voices on human rights issues so as to avoid challenges to the legitimacy of international NGO advocacy.

To make southern NGOs effective, she stressed the importance of domestic institutions to enable NGO participation in policy and direct access for southern NGOs to international institutions, like the Council. Lucia argued that southern governments have often treated foreign policy as separate from “public” policy, not welcoming participation by the public or even legislatures. She described a number of Connectas activates aimed at creating domestic accountability for Brazil’s human rights record abroad, including:

- » Publishing a yearbook on Brazil’s activities at the UN
- » Forming an NGO/Parliamentary committee to meet with the executive and call for information
- » Leading campaigns on specific human rights issues, such as the crisis in Zimbabwe, by raising the profile of these issues in a number of southern states
- » Working directly at UN bodies.

Lucia noted several consistent challenges, including reciprocal information sharing from Geneva to member state advocates, a lack of strategic commitment from southern NGOs to engage at the international level, the need for models of successful advocacy, and institutional capacity. She suggested that donors can assist in each of these areas by:

- » Supporting information dissemination
- » Sharing ideas between regions on successful models
- » Supporting civil society actors in strategically important countries, such as regional leaders
- » Providing long-term institutional and capacity support.

During **questions and answers**, several important issues were raised. Many questioners discussed the distinction between international and “southern” actors, including:

- » The danger that powerful regional countries would soon be accused of meddling if they pursued activist human rights policies
- » The danger of tainting southern NGOs with international funding (others arguing that transparency can overcome any taint)
- » The artificiality of the international/domestic NGO distinction and the importance of maintaining space for international actors to advocate on human rights issues.
- » The possibility of southern NGOs breaking through regional bloc polarization by taking positions different from their governments.

Discussion also brought out more information about the challenges facing southern NGOs with advocacy priorities in Geneva and New York, with Lucia identifying the importance of information very broadly

defined – the need for expertise in the workings of UN mechanisms, relationships, and timely information about when and how to engage on specific issues.

Blanc concluded by encouraging interested donors to contact OSI.