



WAAS-UN: A Special Consultative Status and its Inspirational Value

Donato Kiniger-Passigli

Head, Fragile States and Disaster Response Group, International Labour Office (ILO);
Fellow, World Academy of Art & Science

As of July 2017, the World Academy of Art & Science, founded in 1960 by eminent thinkers and scientists, has something in common with more acclaimed and celebrated organizations such as CARE International, Greenpeace or Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders).

The commonality is the newly acquired special “consultative status” of WAAS vis-à-vis the United Nations. More precisely, we have gained a status that will allow us (Fellows of this unique interdisciplinary academy) to be heard in conjunction with the most prominent and universal international organization through its visionary Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), established in 1945 by the United Nations Charter as the principal organ, under the authority of the General Assembly, to promote:

- a. Higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development;
- b. Solutions for international economic, social, and health related problems; and international cultural and educational cooperation; and
- c. Universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.

The Academy was granted the prestigious UN consultative status after a laborious and lengthy application process, a prerequisite to enter into this special relation after UN member states’ appropriate review of its statutes, objectives, present and past affiliations, and of course, achievements. This thorough examination allowed us to graduate among other fellow institutions whose opinion, ideas and initiatives deserve universal attention. We could well say that it was about time for this “special licence” to be issued to an Academy that has about twenty Nobel laureates among its ranks!

If we read in between the lines, the UN-ECOSOC’s mission is the equivalent to a universal program that cuts across human knowledge, aspirations and challenges. It is almost an existential quest with multiple perspectives and one single objective: the universal attainment of peace and prosperity.

The same could be said of the Academy that has a long history and success stories to share in all fields of human activities and contributes to the progress of mankind through the creative thinking of its members.

At this juncture, a question could be raised: Does the United Nations that predates WAAS by 15 years mirror the objectives of our Academy or is it the Academy (that was in gestation for almost two decades) that has the ambition to cover and propose global solutions in the sphere that absorbs the largest multilateral organization? Certainly, this question will not shake the foundations of the UN glass-curtain headquarters solidly standing on the shores of the East River in New York, with offices in virtually all countries of the world. This clearly indicates that both institutions have a fundamental inspirational role to play. As Ivo Šlaus, Honorary President of WAAS, said at a memorable event in Dubrovnik, “Our duty is not to produce science or art, but to inspire and advise”. In doing so, we remain true to our motto: “Leadership in thought that leads to action”.

Even in times of crises, ethical and financial, nobody could challenge the United Nations’ authority as the main convenor of the international debate for all political, economic, environmental, demographic and social challenges that confront the globalized ecosystem. Over the years, the United Nations lifted its own internal curtains in order to open up to contributions from the academic world and, in the last two decades, more decisively from private foundations and the private sector tout-court. It was an engagement that openly sought not only to expand the scope and breadth of its activities but also to leverage resources and perhaps gradually transform an organization made of nations into an organization that more overtly represents the interests of the people of those nations.

This change has been gradual and slow but it is happening in front of our eyes. To appreciate the magnitude and scale of the ongoing transformation, it is enough to reflect on the new emphasis that the UN is placing on issues of crisis prevention, peacebuilding, the determination to overcome the humanitarian/development divide and to break the internal silos, while changing work modalities. This is a radical shift from the reactive mode of post-crisis interventions, the stereotype of never-ending traditional peace-keeping operations, multiple assessment missions, and often disjoint development programs. Efforts to integrate perspectives by specialized agencies will hopefully fit into collective initiative and results. An example of this is the growing consensus on the key role of employment promotion in the range of measures that should be taken in anticipation and as response to crises.

It is therefore not by chance that only now, with several decades of delay, has the World Academy entered into this privileged position allowing us to nurture and expand a promising relationship that will give us the opportunity to improve the level of the debate, influence contemporary processes and deepen the general understanding of new projects catered to the well-being of humanity. What we need is an insider view, a sort of “embedded approach” (into UN affairs) to provide in-depth knowledge and accessible answers.

We therefore look at this new beginning with renewed enthusiasm and curiosity, and with the sparkle of the newcomer or an apprentice entering the UN’s long corridors for the first time, conscious that experience and knowledge are what we can offer best to the world-at-large.

The Academy will not stop pursuing its own program, and will continue calling for a human-centered paradigm shift that is required to confront man-made complexities, hazards and the fragile landscape affecting almost two billion people globally. Its Fellows will eventually walk through the various UN assemblies, human rights councils and sustainable development conferences with the certitude that those revolving doors will open up upon issuance of a badge and the Academy's nameplate will be used not just to obtain a seat at the table but to offer thoughts, advice and support.

Albert Einstein, one of our organization's founding fathers, once said: "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious." True to his legacy, WAAS Fellows will keep wandering in and exploring the realms of UN's and other important affairs with unabated passion and commitment.

Author contact information

Email: kiniger@ilo.org