



Barriers to the “Global Aggregation” of Civil Society Organizations

Challenges to creating a collective voice for Global Civil Society

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The only comments project principals invite on this paper are indications of errors of omission – pitfalls we neglected to identify. The paper will not be discussed in October. The purpose is to ensure we are mindful of the difficulties and objections facing any initiative.

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the factors which may be barriers to cooperation to concentrate and focus the voices of global civil society. The barriers articulated in this paper will be noted, but will not be a topic of focus or discussion in the Civil Society Conference. The conference participants will attempt to envision possibilities for an effective arrangement which best represents the diversity of global civil society, and the roadmap to make it happen.

This paper explores each of the following factors, the barriers preventing coordinated advocacy of global civil society:

1. Opposition to the Notion of Aggregating
2. Varying and Multiple Objectives
3. Incompatible Organizational Structures
4. Incompatible Organizational Cultures
5. Differences in Perspectives and Frameworks
6. Differences in Technical Knowledge and Competence
7. Divergent Tactics
8. Different “Life Expectancies”
9. Problems with Leadership
10. Competition for Resources
11. Hostility of governments and IGOs
12. Hostility of CSO Sponsors
13. Cultural and Linguistic Barriers
14. What if it works?

Introduction

The premise is that in order to have increased impact in current international governance, global civil society (GSC) must aggregate their advocacy efforts. Currently, the sheer number of NGOs operating internationally and the diversity of their voices would overwhelm the capacity of International Government Organizations (IGOs) receptive to integrating civil society voices into decision making. Without a legitimate mechanism through which to seek the input of civil society, IGOs are most likely to hear the strongest, best resourced and most politically connected voices, namely those of large, northern NGOs

The consequences of creating a global civil society “entity” or unified “front” would be significant. By aggregating, global civil society could exploit opportunities for making a greater impact. They could use resources and energy more efficiently by avoiding duplication and uncoordinated efforts in shared and parallel causes. They could offer international institutions the service of a legitimate, representative and accountable “voice” to advise in global decision making. A representative and legitimate “voice” of civil society could be effectively channeled into decisions made at cross-sectional, collaborative meetings such as the G8 or the UN Chief Executives Board.

However, given the complexity, size, and scope of GCS organizations, the process of creating an aggregated “front” or “voice” is confronted with barriers and challenges. Civil Society’s strongest asset – its diversity – is also its greatest challenge when attempting to cooperate. The remainder of this paper explores the nature of barriers to civil society aggregation, arising from the inherent complexity and diversity.

“Conflict is inevitable. To achieve solutions, a variety of ideas and approaches are needed. These are the ingredients for progress”

Anonymous

1. Opposition to the Notion of Aggregating

A Question of Luxury: Some civil society groups challenge the very idea that civil society should attempt to aggregate. They argue that given the current situation, where the NGO community is severely under-funded, access to international meetings is limited, and some NGOs are struggling to secure the basic right to exist, the notion of aggregation is a question of luxury. It should be secondary to more critical issues including equity, legitimacy, and hostile governments that weaken, subordinate or control NGOs. Some fear that if power imbalances and resource inequities are not first addressed, the aggregated voice of global civil society would set agendas and take actions that mirror Northern interests. The critiques of the Cardoso Report¹ articulate that nothing should deflect the debate from the most pressing issues - the necessary improvements in support and funding for NGOs, and the increasingly restrictive security environment around IGOs and international meetings.

Who is Civil Society? Some may argue on theoretical grounds that the construct of global civil society is spurious. Civil society is nearly impossible to characterize or define. What authority would delineate the boundaries of civil society eligibility? Does civil society include the informal, sporadic and localized efforts and networks of the South, or is it a more Euro-centric version of civil society? Does civil society include “uncivil” groups? Does it include business?

A Decrease in Social Power: Others might be skeptical of a system in which civil society is a full partner with governments and institutions, operating inside the halls of the bureaucracy. A common fear is that this type of participation may sustain the hegemony of the bourgeoisie by increasing the appearance of legitimacy of international organizations, whose existence, mandates and methods are opposed. In practice, such close participation with institutions could prove to be illusory, serving only to soften the impact of the neo-liberal decisions, and ensuring continuity and minimizing disturbance.

2. Varying and Multiple Objectives

Missions and orientations of different organizations are sometimes incompatible. Different groups have different, if not inconsistent philosophies and social justice goals. This type of friction may occur across constituencies (i.e. poverty vs. the environment vs. security). It also may occur within constituencies (i.e. conservation vs. preservation in environmentalism²; poverty

¹ Global Policy Forum. “*NGO Contributions & Responses.*” Online at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/>. Accessed July 25, 2006.

² With respect to the use of nature, there are two opposing views within the environmental movement: preservation vs. conservation. Preservationists (such as John Muir) argue the *protection of nature from use*. Preservation is the protection of undisturbed wilderness, and protecting nature for nature’s sake. Conversely, conservationists (such as Gifford Pinchot) advocate for the *proper use of nature*. Conservation supports the managed use of material resources. (Kamani, K. "The Wilderness Idea: A Critical Review." A Better Earth.org. Accessed: August 8, 2006)

alleviation vs. empowerment³). Organizations are often oriented towards different types of projects. Some may push for specific, tangible and outcome based projects (i.e. provide food), while others may focus on institutional and governance changes (i.e. provide new governance norms). Such philosophical variations on a common theme lead to disagreements on priority approaches and solutions.

Even when objectives and missions are compatible, there will be disagreements in the competition to select priorities. Choices must be made as effectiveness entails “not chasing all the rabbits all the time.”⁴ Creating an alliance necessitates compromise, a concept which may deter many CSOs who believe their issue is (and should remain) “Number 1”. Some CSOs may refuse to consider any form of cooperation that does not rank their issue as highest priority. Priority setting is often a minefield. For instance, human rights groups may balk at joining a coalition which decides to concentrate its efforts on pressing environmental issues, and vice versa.

Thoughts of aggregation elicit CSO fears of marginalization. Because there may be a loss of autonomy, organizations fear the loss of individual branding and messaging. Additionally, there is a fear that cooption may occur if the “aggregated” voice of civil society engages with a government or corporate entity. Another feared consequence of aggregation, is a possible “race to the bottom”. Forcing a consensus in opinion may mean that everyone “loses” and no organization gets to communicate its true opinion. Merging opinions from opposite sides of the spectrum means the resulting consensus “voice” may communicate weak and watered down ideas – it may not advocate the strong change that groups desire.

3. Incompatible Organizational Structures

Limits to the Organization of Civil Society

The basic nature of global civil society is relatively incompatible with the functional structures present in a business or government organization. However, such structures (or variations on the theme) must be in place when attempting to organize into a “voice” or forum which represents the multitude of players in global civil society. Civil Society cannot be neatly organized or classified into functional divisions and given mandates within which to operate. Civil Society has no bottom line, or common objective which drives all of its actions. Civil Society is not decision oriented. Beyond obvious logistical constraints, (who could make a decision on behalf of civil society? How would that decision be made? Who would have input on that decision?) the “culture of decision making” is absent from many NGOs – they are seen as victims, not problem solvers. Some suggest that NGOs often articulate similar problems, but less frequently present parallel solutions. Global civil society is not hierarchical, and democratic decision making (majority rule) cannot work in a network. Typically, civil society finds the idea of “being represented” a problematic one. As Jo Marie Griesgraber notes:

“In 2000 the Canadian PM wanted to have a select group of NGOs work with him and “participate” in the G20. At first Canadian NGOs said “No!—everyone must be allowed

³ The difference between the “poverty alleviation” approach and the “empowerment” approach can be exemplified by an age old axiom. According to the former, one should “give a man a fish”; according to the latter, one should “teach a man to fish”.

⁴ In Canada there is an apocryphal story about Joe Clark, then Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who faced entreaties from his staff to select priority issues to ensure effective deployment of limited resources facing many objectives, each competing for the limited resources. They told him “We cannot chase all the rabbits all the time”. Clark responded “chase all the rabbits, all the time”. He is remembered as being particularly ineffective.

in". At a meeting in Prague most NGOs again told Paul Martin he could not exclude anyone, especially not from the South..."⁵

She elaborates on the "basic conundrum"

"NGOs want to represent and speak for the "voiceless"; we want to make sure we are in the room, but we do not want the responsibility of formally representing anyone; nor do we want to concede authority to those who are formally selected to represent us because we suggest that no process is good enough to select representatives - We are not consistent!"⁶

There is sometimes a disconnect between the intrinsic nature of civil society and the necessity to organize and function effectively.

Varying Organizational Structures

Among the plethora of CSOs there are numerous different, and sometimes incompatible, ways of organizing and structuring. For instance, difficulties will arise when informal, loosely structured organizations attempt to aggregate with more formally run groups. Hierarchical organizations may not be comfortable collaborating within the horizontal structure posed by "flat" organization, and vice versa. The operating structure of social movements, charitable organizations, and advocacy groups vary and working across different operating structures may be difficult. Some are organized around common interests; others are ad hoc (allied less by pre-determined purpose than by a shared response to an immediate stimulus or crisis).

4. Incompatible Organizational Cultures

The Personality Factor

Civil Society Organizations often have an institutionalized personality and culture. The identity of the group is often reflected in the identity and personality of the leader. As such, personality conflicts between leaders (and therefore between CSOs) may pose a barrier to cooperation and aggregation. Different organizational cultures might also be sources of divergence, causing clashes despite parallel ends. For example, a group that engages in high profile public actions and a group that operates on building analytic tools for activism may find that their organizational cultures do not lend themselves well to cooperation. Different personalities and cultures make it difficult for groups to work harmoniously with one another.

A Clash of Values

Civil Society Organizations may hold different principal values. These underlying values are the basis upon which problems are interpreted and solutions are proposed. Even when underlying values are acknowledged and articulated, it is difficult to find agreement. For example, some CSOs value the maximization of gross welfare and economic growth. Others place greater importance on cultural and ecological integrity. Some believe strongly in expeditious processes and majority-rule. Others will insist on taking the time needed for consensus decision making. Differences in the underlying values held by CSOs give rise to the multiplicity of perspectives on a particular issue.

The "Tribal" Imperative

⁵ Personal correspondence. Email from Jo Marie Griesgraber to Barry Carin. August 2nd, 2006.

⁶ Personal correspondence. Email from Jo Marie Griesgraber to Barry Carin. August 2nd, 2006.

Sensitivities may arise over who speaks for whom. Anyone not sharing the same “identity” of the group (ethnicity, gender, age, location, urban bias, occupation) may be deemed not suited to speak on behalf of that group. For instance, tensions may arise if men attempt to speak for women, or Northerners speak on behalf of Southerners. Even within constituencies there may be tensions over who represents whom. For instance, environmental groups with an extremely leftist perspective may not want to be represented by a more middle ground group.

The “Class” Factor

Tensions may arise between CSOs of different “classes”; for instance, between an “elite” trans-border NGO and a locally focused grassroots group. Conflicts may arise over language, strategy, tactics, and allocating resources. Cooperation may not happen easily between a large US NGO and a grass roots African women’s cooperative, for example. Additionally, some social movements explicitly state that they do not want members from another “class”. For example, farmers in Brazil are suspicious of support extended by anyone who is not a farmer.

Disciplinary Differences

The disciplinary silos of academia and government may also be present within and between CSOs. Bridging these disciplinary gaps is often problematic and may prove to be a barrier to the effective aggregation of CSOs. For instance, an economist may wish to condense the anthropologists’ research paper into a bulleted list containing no more than ten items. The anthropologist, however, may be horrified at the idea of oversimplifying the inherent complexities of the ten page version. The variation in methods of inquiry, presentation and problem solving, let alone the foundational differences in disciplines, may make it difficult for professionals to work across disciplinary boundaries.

5. Differences in Perspectives and Frameworks

CSOs with the same ends often disagree strongly about the means. Sometimes the reason why such groups disagree isn’t truly a difference of opinion with respect to the issue, but rather “lies in differences of perspective and framework”⁷. The following examples illustrate how different perspectives and frameworks may cause conflict:

Aggregation: Groups may instinctively operate at different levels of aggregation when they talk about outcomes or consequences. For example, when assessing poverty, the analysts for “group A” may look at the incidence of poverty while analysts for “group B” think about the absolute numbers of the poor. Therefore, in Ghana between 1987 and 1991, Group A sees the incidence of poverty falling one percent a year. However, Group B sees the total population growing twice that rate, resulting in a sizable increase in the absolute number of poor. Operating on the local level, Group B sees the number of people needing soup kitchens and homeless shelters increase, and to be told by Group A that poverty has fallen is “bound to lead to difficulties in communication and dialogue”⁸. Neither view is wrong, but “different parts of the same objective reality are being seen and magnified”⁹

Time Horizon: “Group A” may be working in the “medium term” when thinking about consequences and outcomes, whereas “group B” may have shorter and longer term concerns. Whether implicit or explicit, differences in time horizon cause conflicts. “Group A” thinks of outcomes in the 5-10 year time horizon, while “group B” is concerned about the immediate

⁷ Kanbur, R. “*Economic Policy, Distribution and Poverty: The Nature of Disagreements.*” Cornell University, 2001.

⁸ Kanbur, R. “*Economic Policy, Distribution and Poverty: The Nature of Disagreements.*” Cornell University, 2001.

⁹ Kanbur, R. “*Economic Policy, Distribution and Poverty: The Nature of Disagreements.*” Cornell University, 2001.

impacts (“short run survival trumps medium run benefits every time”¹⁰) and long term impacts (environmental groups think on a 50-100 year time horizon) Although the difference in perspective of time horizon was the issue, the disagreement was viewed as having to do with the specifics of the issue at hand.

6. Differences in Technical Knowledge and Competence

Differences in technical knowledge and competence between CSOs may be problematic when attempting to form an aggregated body. CSOs that lack technical expertise may have less “say” over a situation even though they might be closer to the issue, and better equipped to convey messages from the affected people.

7. Divergent Tactics

The “glue” that holds groups together may be an impediment to forging alliances with other groups. For instance, members of a research institute may demur from joining a street demonstration. Groups that share similar goals and are working towards parallel ends might be critical of each others tactics. Some might believe it more effective to protest and throw sand into the machine; while others may deem that counteractive and short-sighted. Scales of action may also cause disconnect between groups. For instance, Northern NGOs typically work on a global scale, while Southern NGOs stress local and national issues.

8. Different “Life Expectancies”

The varying “life expectancies” of CSOs poses a challenge to civil society aggregation. Some organizations are permanently established groups. Others are shorter term groupings that will cease to exist once an action is completed. Civil Society Networks also have varying life expectancies. Some networks are formed as an ad-hoc response to a pressing issue and will dissolve shortly after the issue is addressed. Other networks, such as CIVICUS are more enduring coalitions.

9. Problems with Leadership

“The leader who knows when to listen, when to act, and when to withdraw can work effectively with nearly anyone, even with other professionals, groups leaders, or therapists...”

The Tao of Leadership #28¹¹

The cooperation and aggregation of civil society requires that leaders of CSOs engage in consensus, compromise, and mediation with other leaders. It might be suggested that there is an intrinsic tension between the required sensitive conciliation skills, and “typical” personal characteristics of effective leaders. Taoist leaders are needed.

Leaders of CSOs who have the motivation and vision to mobilize others around a cause typically function best when operating autonomously. Leaders are used to being followed. This is not to suggest that leaders don’t recognize the necessity and benefits of forming alliances. However, leaders may not be accustomed to sharing of power and leadership duties, which is a necessity

¹⁰ Kanbur, R. “*Economic Policy, Distribution and Poverty: The Nature of Disagreements.*” Cornell University, 2001.

¹¹ Heider, John. *The Tao of Leadership.* Humanics Limited: USA. Pg 55. 1985.

when forming alliances. Furthermore, individual leaders (and their organizations) tend to be overburdened and may find participating in collations not worth the additional strain and effort. Some CSOs may be led by a group of leaders such as an executive board or secretariat. Within this group leadership model, the already over-taxed group of people may find networking and achieving consensus particularly arduous and unmanageable.

10. Competition for Resources

CSOs compete for the same pool of donor funds. This creates a culture of competition between groups that may be working towards similar goals. An aggregated civil society group might be perceived as yet another competitor in a lottery which is a zero sum game. For some groups, participating in a “United Way” type of alliance could be seen to potentially reduce available funds.

11. Hostility of Governments and IGOs

Some authoritarian and undemocratic governments see civil society as a force that subverts governmental influence. As such, a global level organization representing civil society would be an anathema to such national governments. Pointing to inconsistencies in views and priorities, some governments use the fractured and disjointed nature of civil society as a justification to retain a monopoly of decision making power. Such government hostility is a barrier to the participation of many Southern based NGOs; creating a barrier to a successful global aggregation. Furthermore, officials may succumb to bureaucratic nature, hoard information, and may be jealous with regard to sharing power. Some authorities resent that the governors of some global issues lie in private sector and hybrid bodies (e.g. ICANN, Global Fund, fair trade schemes) and will resist further “sharing of power”.

12. Hostility of CSO Sponsors

NGOs and CSOs are heavily dependent on their sponsors and supporters, including private firms, foundations, governments, political parties, wealthy individuals. These stakeholders may regard the attempt to create an aggregated civil society body as weakening control over their civil society clients. As such, CSOs who participate in the movement to aggregate may lose critical financial and political support.

13. Cultural and Linguistic Barriers

Communication across languages and cultures is particularly difficult. The process of decision making and priority setting is made increasingly difficult due to cultural and linguistic barriers to dialogue. Such barriers are elaborated upon in the Civil Society Conference companion paper by Marjorie Mitchell, entitled “Cultural Differences”.

14. What if it works?

Many people, including the NGO community and civil society advocates themselves, are concerned about the grave consequences that may arise from a powerful, influential and unchecked civil society. An aggregated civil society group may be subject to the same criticisms that are often articulated of civil society in general. Civil Society may have flawed policies and approaches despite laudable ends; or suffer from undemocratic principles and lack transparency. Indeed such issues are problematic. However, if civil society were to successfully aggregate into

a “voice” which effectively engaged in policy making arenas, these flaws will become of serious concern. The uncertainty surrounding “what if it works” creates worry within the CSO community, which proves to be yet another barrier to action towards an aggregated body.

Conclusion

This paper explores some of the most pressing barriers faced when attempting to facilitate the cooperation of global civil society. The aforementioned list is by no means comprehensive. It is intended to provide conference participants with a shared understanding of the complexities involved in the designated task of designing a “venue” to focus and amplify the voice of global civil society. Participants should not be disempowered by the challenges presented in this paper; nor should they focus their efforts on discussing and solving them one by one. Rather, the conference will proceed under the basic premise -- roadblocks are navigable. Participants are asked to formulate possible methods of creating of a common and articulate global civil society “voice”, keeping in mind Albert Einstein’s maxim:

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them”

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