

A Guide to the Civil Society Conference Background Papers

The project premise is that in order to have increased influence in current international governance, global civil society (GCS) must aggregate their advocacy efforts. 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. The six papers summarized below provide a backdrop and context for the discussion of three conjectural scenarios on the future successful “aggregation” of existing groups to create a new entity to effectively give voice to global civil society.

Background Paper

Kirsten Magus

The Conference aim is to examine various options and processes through which global civil society (GCS) can give voice to their interests in global policy-making milieus. The background paper explains the reasoning for the need for such processes in terms of four primary propositions:

1. The Westphalian state system has been transformed by globalization into a multi-layered, multi-centric and multi-actor form of global governance.
2. GCS is a significant agent internationally, advocating for effective and equitable policies, and providing legitimacy for governance processes and policies.
3. GCS faces significant challenges in its bid to legitimize its presence in global governance.
4. There are opportunities for processes that give GCS effective voice in global policy-making milieus.

With the rise of multiple non-state actors, states are no longer the sole arbiters of international policy, but partners in a multi-layered, multi-centric and multi-actor form of global governance. One non-state actor is global civil society, a powerful force for change. Despite its effective agency internationally, GCS has no formal or institutional venue to project its voice into international policy-making milieus.

Absent the voice of GCS, international decisions can lack transparency and accountability, so often are perceived as illegitimate. Inclusion of GCS, however, exposes decision-makers to global public opinion, encourages more comprehensive analyses and debate, and creates a policy-making process that is more transparent, responsive and accountable to the global public. Inclusion of civil society voice would improve the quality of decision-making processes; resultant policy can be more effective and legitimate.

Policy-makers must use ad hoc approaches to access the vast resources within GCS. We need more effective processes designed specifically to gather, aggregate and articulate the voice of GCS. Such processes are challenged to aggregate the many and diverse voices within GCS; the task may be possible by application of networks. A number of processes exist, including Civil G8, the multi-stakeholder process and the Women’s Caucus. The Centre for Global Studies project aims to examine options for promising processes to be designed by GCS.

“Laying the Groundwork: Considerations for a Charter for the Proposed Civil Society Forum”

Andrew S. Thompson (CIGI)

Thompson’s paper focuses on the necessity of a strong group Charter for any new Civil Society Forum (CSF). He explores possible options for the Charter mandate; criteria for determining the size and make-up of the membership; guidelines for funding; and a clear statement outlining the forum’s place and role within the existing international system. Thompson highlights past experiences and models for guidance, including the International Non-Governmental Organizations’ (INGOs) Accountability Charter, and existing CSO networks, such as the International Council on Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), InterAction and the World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS), all of which could serve as a rough blueprint for the CSF. He notes that setting the parameters for this new venue is an inherently political act, one that will ultimately determine both the legitimacy of the forum, and whether it is equally beneficial to the needs of

international civil society as it is to those of states and international governmental organizations. Thompson urges that a true partnership amongst actors is necessary to create a constructive and complimentary CSF to house and facilitate a great number of CSOs while simultaneously relieving IGOs of the added encumbrances that have come with being more inclusive.

Barriers to Aggregation

The Centre for Global Studies (CFGS)

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 paper explores several barriers to civil society aggregation, arising from the inherent complexity and diversity:

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?

This 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.

Models of Aggregation

The Centre for Global Studies (CFGS)

This paper provides an overview of a range of contemporary models of aggregation for cooperation, collaboration, and coalition. A taxonomy of civil society models of aggregation is described. The typology of networks, consortia, alliances and forums is intended to draw attention to different types of organization structures. Such a typology may help to provide insights into effective means of consolidating the collective knowledge and resources of “global civil society” and focusing the diversity of their voices.

An organizational theory perspective highlights various structural and compositional factors and strategic objectives adopted by the civil society coalitions. Organizational profiles for select civil society entities are classified with respect to nine sets of descriptive characteristics:

1. Degree of Formality / Informality
2. Shape of Governance Mechanisms: Vertical (Hierarchical) / Horizontal (Flat)
3. Permanent (comprised of many permanent bodies / One Time (few permanent bodies)
4. Routinized / Ad Hoc
5. Closed-Restricted Membership / Open-Non-Restricted Membership
6. “Like” (single-sector membership) / “Like-Minded” (multi-sector membership)
7. Focused Objectives / Broad Objectives

8. Inflexible Mandate / Flexible Mandate
9. Results-Oriented / Dialogue-Oriented

For expository purposes, the models of aggregation are depicted by ascending vertical and horizontal scales. A two-dimensional graph, containing a vertical axis and a horizontal axis, organizes models in terms of their organizational characteristics and separates the graph into four central quadrants. The nine descriptive “binaries” are grouped loosely together around those factors that are oriented toward structure and composition and those that more closely correspond to strategic objectives. The selected organizations are plotted with the most formal/structured and results-oriented being plotted in the top-right quadrant and the least formal/structured and results-oriented in the bottom-left quadrant. The heuristic graph represents one lens to organize the descriptive characteristics and depict models of aggregation visually.

Cultural Differences

Dr. Marjorie Mitchell, Anthropologist, University of Victoria

Given that the Civil Society conference brings together people of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, it is essential for all participants to be mindful of the multiplicity of cultural and linguistic challenges that may enhance or impede intercultural understanding. Mitchell provides a perspective on some of the challenges of intercultural communication.

1. **Culture and Language:** No two cultures or languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same reality.
2. **Cultural Diversity, Communicative Style and Social Interaction:** Being mindful of differences can be useful for understanding processes of allocating responsibility, decision-making, debating, and conflict management.
3. **Communicative Competence and Ambiguity:** Encompasses not only how to speak, but also how to listen and understand.
4. **Politeness and Face:** Mindfulness among all participants to cultural variation in how issues of self-esteem and respect are expressed is an important component of effective information exchange, goal-setting, and decision-making.
5. **Speech Communities** Conference participants must be attentive and responsive to cultural differences in speakers’ use of traditional communicative styles that employ narratives of the past as a way to illuminate current issues.

Mitchell offers techniques to help enhance communicative affinity among conference participants. She urges conference participants to pay careful attention to their own subjective reactions to the speech and behaviors of other participants and be mindful of how others may interpret their communicative efforts.

“what is unconscious is not within a person’s control, but what is made conscious is available for human beings to understand, to change, or to reinforce” (Fisher & Brown 1988:16 as cited in Gudykunst 1991:134.)

NGO Channels for Participation

The Centre for Global Studies (CFGS)

The “NGO Channels for Participation” paper provides a rough overview of some of the different ways in which Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are involved in intergovernmental organizations. The paper notes 12 main “channels” and provides a brief explanation and example of each:

1. Advisory Committee / Steering Committee set up by an institution
2. Dedicated Unit within the IGO
3. CSO Advisors in national delegations
4. Participation in Official Conferences to draft a treaty
5. Preparatory Committees for International Conferences
6. Presentations to Officials in special sessions

7. Membership in International Organization
8. Civil Society Representation on Executive Board
9. NGO Forums
10. Regular / Scheduled Consultative Meetings between CSOs and IGOs
11. CSO Attendance in IGO Meetings
 - NGO Attendance at Council Meetings:
 - Participation in annual sessions of Board, Commissions, and Expert Meetings: UN
 - Formal access to inter-governmental meetings
 - NGO participation in the procedure for taking evidence
12. Implementation/Service Provision/Operational Relations

It also includes comparative tables of “NGO Participation in a Selection of International Bodies” and “NGO Participation in International Judicial and Quasi Judicial Proceedings”. Annex A contains descriptions by various organizations (in their words) of their methods for civil society engagement.