



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.

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

impacts (“short run survival trumps medium run benefits every time”

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