THE VOICES OF GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

Waterloo, Ontario

FINAL REPORT

INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

In October, 2006, 33 people from around the world gathered to consider vexing issues facing global civil society (GCS) today and to brainstorm strategies to address those issues[1]. This report summarizes the major themes and substance of the two day conversation. The report starts with a brief review of the global context and presenting problems. It then discusses the needs and opportunities presented by this context, as well as a primary challenge GCS faces in addressing the opportunities. Next, critical principles and values to guide the development and implementation of selected strategic approaches are reviewed. Finally, ideas for strategic approaches and next steps are summarized. This group is clear that its views do not represent those of all GCS and recommends that ideas generated during these two days be tested within a broader scope of GCS[2].

THE CONTEXT

Globalization is fast drawing together the destinies of people's from far corners of the world. Global relations are increasing, varying forms of global governance are proliferating and decisions affecting the lives of citizens around the world are being made in locales far from those they affect. The world is now highly interrelated, interconnected and messy. These trends are requiring that citizens around the world connect and engage with the institutions of global governance.

Global governance in the 21st century is characterized by unilateralism and fundamentalism. Vast resources are expended on arms and violence. Powerful governments blatantly flout international regimes and rules and take actions that lead to riches for a few at the expense of many. Other governments acquire and maintain power, not through democratic means, but through violence, but are nonetheless accepted into global governance milieus. Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), staffed by unelected officials, regularly create 'rules of the game' regarding interaction of citizens with the institutions. Global governance, though it carries authority and power, lacks legitimacy.

Governments have the responsibility to protect their citizens, and when they breach that responsibility, the international community has the right to intercede. These democratic deficits, as well as those witnessed in other global governance bodies, create the space into which global civil society (GCS) asserts itself to articulate a voice different from the private and governmental sectors.

THE OVERARCHING GOAL

Citizen involvement in global governance is hindered in numerous ways. Rules of engagement between GCS and global governance bodies are nonexistent or are not made explicit. GCS doesn't have a place at the table of international governance, and some avenues once open, e.g., global conferences, etc., have been closed. Moreover, there has been a backlash against GCS in some international decision-making milieus, eroding citizen's access to policy making regarding their lives. Additional problems are posed within GCS itself, e.g., disparities in access to power, resources and decision-making, and the dominance of northern-based international NGOs which crowd out local, southern-based groups.

The overarching goal, given this context, is to enhance democratic global governance. Mechanisms to hold governments and IGOs accountable need be created to mitigate the propensity of the powerful to dictate according to their self interests at the expense of the powerless. The unique roles and contributions of all sectors, government, business and GCS, need be incorporated into international governance. And citizen involvement with global governance needs be facilitated.

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[1] See Appendix A for a complete list of conference participants. Appendix B contains conference papers.

[2] Global Civil Society is a contested term, with debates surrounding its existence and its constituents. These issues were discussed, but not resolved in this meeting.

THE NEED

A vision is required to guide both the selection and design of strategic approaches. Simply put, the vision is of inclusive, accountable and systematic venues for GCS to directly influence the heart of global governance policy processes. To accomplish this vision, several needs must be addressed:

1. **GCS must be empowered in advocacy** to influence policy making. The strategic approaches need create an entity or set of tools to build GCS, increase its voice and ensure its real participation so that governance institutions will hear.

2. **People need a space in which to convene**. The space must be framed by commonly accepted rules of engagement, addressing such questions as constitution of GCS groups, i.e., inclusion of government and business groups, and representivity, i.e., in whose name does one speak.

3. **Cross organizational and intersectoral coordination needs be facilitated.** Building bridges between heterogeneous groups to engage around common purpose increases the power of CS. A dynamic of discourse on core issues can capitalize on the strength and creativity inherent in diversity. The purpose is not to homogenize and find consensus, but rather to conserve diversity and discover convergence across difference.

4. **Dialogue to facilitate understanding, seek commonality and clarify differences needs be facilitated**. Even amongst like-minded groups, there is diversity and divergence. A process of dialogue specifically designed to engage people of different perspectives facilitates the discovery of emergent convergence across diversity.

5. **Speed, agility, openness and flexibility** are required of any democratic and inclusive entity designed to operate successfully in this world.

6. **Practice subsidiarity**, addressing issues at the most local level at which they can be solved. This increases the accountability of all levels of government and facilitates democracy.

THE OPPORTUNITY

There are opportunities, both within GCS and within global governance, for GCS to effect positive change in global policy. GCS possesses the power to convene, having drawn together the largest meetings of people on the planet. It brings an expansive array of skills and practices, and carries enormous power when engaged collectively. Within its vast diversity, GCS regularly convenes coalitions to act toward common purpose. If a proposal is presented with clear objectives and values and a universal invitation is given, interested parties will engage to effect the desired change. Venues that facilitate coalition development could be very useful. Moreover, as governance bodies wish to know with whom they are interacting, those venues could provide legitimacy to coalition members.

Within global governance, there also exist opportunities. As governance bodies have proliferated at various levels, e.g., international, regional, subregional, there are many institutions and processes with which GCS doesn't yet engage. These include, for example, intergovernmental forums, interregional arrangements, private and public/private hybrids, fair trade schemes, regional IFIs, the Financial Stability Forum, and the Bank for International Settlements.

THE CHALLENGE: VOICE

Facilitating people's voices internationally is critical. In many corners of the world, people have neither the right to select their governments nor to receive a hearing by those governments. Yet, many examples exist of people finding other venues in which to articulate their voice to effect positive changes in their own countries. Many times, people have surpassed their local governments and focused instead on institutions of global governance.

There is great power in the people's voice. Dialogue within GCS raises awareness of issues, creates clarity around values and how various issues impact those values, and builds active participation. Where convergence occurs, GCS voice gains strength.

GCS, however, does not speak with one voice, but rather with many. While diversity is a strength, it also is a challenge. Fragmentation and the cacophony of multiple voices can create white noise, effectively canceling all and providing those in power with a rationale to dismiss GCS and select policies for their own benefit. GCS is challenged to both conserve the rich diversity and move beyond incapacitating cacophony. Governments and business also don't speak with one voice, but have created mechanisms to enable and channel articulation of various voices while managing discord and facilitating decision-making. GCS can devise and utilize such processes. And while not seeking or requiring consensus, the processes can identify convergence and build common ground among like-minded as well as divergent groups

PRINCIPLES OF STRATEGIC APPROACHES

Strategic approaches designed to advance the vision need be guided by critical principles.

1. **Don't assume an organization.** No organization or process can or should be set up as the apex of global civil society. There are multiple ways to organize GCS, for example, according to the purpose of the specific campaign. A preferable overall organizing principle for GCS can be conceptualized as a web with multiple, interactive nodes. This would better suit the current global context and the diversity of GCS.

2. **Form follows Function.** Shared values and convergence of purpose unify across diversity. Define the purpose, goals and values of the strategic approach first. Then, determine the appropriate structure. The mission is to facilitate voices that are not being heard. A goal is to create a dynamic of discourse on core issues across sectors and cultures.

3. **Don't replicate.** GCS is rich with resources which need to be mapped. These include Social Watch, CIVICUS, WSF, ICANN, IEFT, CONGO, UBUNTO and BRIDGE, as well as universities and resource groups. Develop strategic approaches to complement, not replicate, these resource, e.g., build complimentary processes in unaddressed areas.

4. **Create facilitative strategic approaches**. Create a space for GCS to engage in dialogue. Play a facilitative role to enable and encourage voice. Ensure access and create learning through dialogue. Facilitate creation of issue-based alliances. Maintain integrity of individual identities and autonomy while facilitating linkages, complimentarity and cooperation across networks.

5. **Remain process-oriented and non-ideological**. Act as an enabler. Focus on process, e.g., inclusion, clear universally applied procedures, agreements on working together and negotiating differences, fluent and clear communication, strategic plans, learning and adaptation, utilization of technology, and capacity development.

6. **Assume regional devolution.** Bearing in mind that 'global' and 'international' rapidly becomes northern dominated, design strategic approaches with regional application.

VALUES OF STRATEGIC APPROACH

Strategic approaches designed to advance the vision also need to be guided by critical values. Of import is the distinction between process and substantive values. While every policy is laced with substantive values, e.g., conserve wetlands or women's right to choice, those will be determined by the participants in the strategic approach. Rather, the goal of the strategic approach is to create a broad space in which divergent views are welcome, so it needs to focus on process values, i.e., those values that ensure the process unfolds in ways valued by participants. These values include:

1. **Access.** Based on the presumptions that all have the right to be heard and many are nonetheless marginalized and voiceless, the strategic approach needs to engage a proactive orientation to ensure access by all, especially the marginalized and voiceless.

2. **Legitimacy**. In a global society, GCS can not claim to represent others in the same way that democratically elected governments can. However, legitimacy can be earned in other ways such as professional and grassroots knowledge, the association with decent human values, and the relationship with democratically elected representatives, e.g., parliamentarians, who share common concern.

3. **Accountability.** The strategic approaches need to ensure downwards accountability, i.e., accountability to those affected by their policies or actions. GCS participants utilizing the strategic approach need be embedded in their national and local societies and be held accountable to them. Effectiveness, rather than efficiency, is suggested as a measure of accountability.

4. **Participation** – Participation must be genuine, not token. It must empower people to articulate their unique and diverse values, advance cooperation while respecting identity and autonomy, capitalize on the creative potential of plurality and diversity, and facilitate clear communication and generative learning.

STRATEGIC APPROACHES

A number of strategic approaches were brainstormed and four were explored in small group settings. Others less fully developed include: employing groups to selectively engage with global institutions; creating space for like-minded groups to collectively develop strategy on specific issues; crafting a forum to analyze and devise strategies regarding the backlash against GCS; establishing a space orientated toward southern GCS where NGOs and social movements can gather; and developing a process to strengthen existing venues. Finally, a note was made that approaches to be developed present deliverables that are tangible and achievable in a short time frame.

1. **Democratizing Global Governance** The purpose, to democratize global governance, is a long-term action-oriented campaign comprised of many smaller initiatives that are locally generated and globally supported.

2. **Harnessing Hegemons** The purpose is to hold powerful countries accountable for following the rule of law as their policies have global influence. When these countries do not follow the rule of law, democratic governance at many levels is undermined. Short term goals are couched in a longer term project.

3. **Mobile Units** The purpose is to respond to the global diffusion of power by enabling rapid mobilization of GCS at various levels of governance The process is to establish channels and communication among GCS sectors. Rapid mobilization teams would be decentralized, flexible in structure, cross-sectoral, regional and high tech. Confidentiality and fluidity are primary values.

4. **Resource Enhancement** The purpose is to develop capacity of GCS by building bridges between universities and GCS. The process is to first discern GCS needs, then make materials accessible and organize them into briefings that GCS can utilize. Skills, such as mapping global power can be developed and facilitated.

NEXT STEPS

Brainstormed next steps include: small groups continue discussions, via IGLOO; create an oversight group to harmonize the various elements; review case studies from FIM and the GCS Yearbook on examples of GCS interacting with international institutions; have practitioners share experiences and expertise; use existing events and organizations to continue discussion of these ideas; test the ideas.