Global Civil Society in the Global Political Arena

BY LISA JORDAN

Global civil society is a relatively new layer of networks and organizations that operate beyond national borders. Over 20,000 of these networks are already active on the world stage, 90 % of which have been formed within the last thirty years. Many — including Jubilee 2000, the Global Campaign to Ban Landmines, Amnesty International – have become household names. The emergence of global civil society can be interpreted as a response by citizens to rapidly changing conditions of governance and community in an increasingly interconnected world, or — in a word — to globalization. Globalization has spread wealth, opportunity and new possibilities across the globe. However, it has also unraveled many of the social and cultural contracts that states and citizens have painstakingly built over the past centuries to advance social goals and protect groups from the abuse of their rights — through rules, standards and regulations that decide how the costs and benefits of change are distributed within and between societies. Within the context of globalization, global civil society plays two important roles that when taken together may add up to global civil society being an agent for democracy.

a) The first of these roles is to improve global governance, at a time when the balance between representative and direct democracy is changing in favor of non-state actors, both civil society and business. These changes create a series of difficult questions and dilemmas about the legitimacy and effectiveness of different forms of politics, but the central challenge remains clear: to create new institutions and processes of governance at the global level that are transparent, accountable to citizens, and open to the voices of those who are affected by decisions. Many issues that used to be resolved at the national level have become global in their causes and effects without the concomitant democratic infrastructure that helps balance the needs of market, state and society in decision-making. Today, trade and environmental policies, industry standards, patent rights, and other agreements are negotiated among governments and business representatives in the international arena, in effect creating the emerging structures of global governance. While civil society cannot and should not replace governments in these negotiations, civil society involvement can enhance the effectiveness of global governance in three ways:

- By legitimizing the outcomes of decisions now taken globally — for example, in implementing the Montreal Protocal on Substances that Deplete the Zone Layer. Acting alone, govern-

ments can confer authority but not legitimacy on decisions made in the global arena.

- By promoting transparency and accountability in global institutions — for example, in creating pressure for World Bank Inspection Panel. Of all the stakeholders in global governance, civil society has the largest stake in extending democracy and democratic principles to the global political arena.

- By providing a more competitive pool of policy ideas and information, thereby improving the quality of debates and decision making — for example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a body of 1900 scientists, has vastly increased the quality and pool of policy options available to negotiators working on a global climate change protocol.

Although civil society is already exercising these functions in some areas of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods Institutions, global governance extends to bodies that have much less public oversight such as the 'Codex Alementarius,' which establishes global health standards for food and pesticide use; the Bank for International Settlements, which develops standards for bank inspectors; the International Organization of Securities Commissions, which oversees regulations for stock markets around the world. There are also myriad transnational networks of expert officials connected to national ministries of environment, finance and trade who agree on 'memoranda of understanding' in place of international treaties; and global meetings of private-sector actors that shape regulatory frameworks — like the Bilderberg Group, the Trilateral Commission, and the World Economic Forum.

Those engaged in these forums are mostly mid-level government officials from the executive branches of national governments, who work alongside individuals from private sector associations or individual companies, and employees from inter-governmental institutions. Strikingly, there are few elected officials anywhere in our institutions of global governance. As a result, problems and solutions are often narrowly defined and the broader public impact of decisions is often overlooked — as in the debate on trade related intellectual property rights (TRIPs) which ignored the impact of a global patent system on access to basic medicines. It took civil society coalitions to highlight these problems, eventually securing a partial exemption for developing countries from TRIPs in the World Trade Organization.

b) A second role for global civil society is to identify needs and problems that tend to be ignored by states and markets, and give voice to issues that require a global public policy. Civil society has historically defined the need for global public policies and

then persuaded government and business to address them — debt relief for example, or holes in the ozone layer, the proliferation of land mines, and the protection of human rights across borders. Most recently, civil society has demanded a global public policy for access to life saving medicines for people with HIV/AIDS, in place of restrictive policies crafted by state and market forces that prioritized the intellectual property rights of pharmaceutical companies. Civil society has not only defined the need for global public policies in these areas, but has also expanded the range of policy solutions available.

c) Underlying these first two roles is a hypothesis that leads on to a third potential contribution. Global civil society may help create a shared set of global norms and values. The density and richness of civil society has been shown to be a key factor in creating a shared culture in nation states, a set of common values, or more simply a sense that despite their differences, people feel that they belong together in a community. Global civil society may be able to foster a similar sense of community at the international level, transferring values, norms and knowledge across geographic space to create the moral foundations on which new social contracts can be constructed. How?

At present, there is no clear answer to this question, but the way in which civic activists enter global debates may be an impediment to creating a shared sense of community. Activists tend to think of themselves as specialists on a specific issue; for example, an environmentalist or human rights supporter, a development specialist or advocate for the poor, or a feminist. In the global arena, these issue-based identities overlap with national identities or increasingly, an identity defined by membership of the 'global South' or 'global North.' However, few activists present themselves as global citizens acting in relation to global governance. Instead, the two prevailing sources of identity — issue-based and geographic — tend to isolate progressive components of global civil society from one another, just as religious or ethnic identities can isolate people in the national context. There are isolated instances when global civil society has come together around an issue that cuts across these narrow identities, but a sense of a strong, united movement is rare.

Faced by these problems, one way forward is to enhance an explicit emphasis on global citizenship, or membership in an increasingly interconnected polity, by supporting nascent efforts to find common ground among a diverse and pluralistic set of actors. Such experiments may promote a genuine sense of overlapping identity and lay the foundations for a global civic culture based on broader public deliberation and tolerance for diverse views.

GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY: AN IMPERFECT INSTRUMENT

Global civil society is plagued by two main problems that weaken its potential to act as an agent for progressive democratic change in the global political arena: elitism and a failure to address power and process within its own structures.

The elite nature of global civil society — meaning a lack of genuine grassroots participation in transnational networks, especially from the global South — leads to a limited pool of leaders, decreases accountability to mass-based constituencies, and encourages fragmentation along geographic or issue-based lines. International environmental NGOs, for example, are often depicted as elitist, with no grassroots constituency in Southern countries. Elitism makes it difficult for global civil society to defend itself against criticism from governments who question the legitimacy of groups active in the global arena. It also allows governments or governmental bodies to create quasi-NGOs and then send them to international negotiations as civil society representatives, as Cameroon and Chad did when promoting the Chad-Cameroon Pipeline project at the World Bank. Intergovernmental agencies can also bypass global civil society and build co-optive relationships with leaders of major movements at the national level who, while legitimate, may not be deeply involved in international debates.

In part, elitism results from the high barriers to entry that exist in the global political arena, where the working language is almost always English and the settings are expensive and "Western" (e.g., Washington, New York, Geneva and Brussels). Successful participation in global forums requires mastery over complex bodies of knowledge, all articulated in English. Operating in the global political arena can also encourage elitist attitudes and strain or sever ties to national and local politics. IUCN, World Wildlife Fund and Conservation International, for example, have all signed exclusive partnership deals with the World Bank and with major multinational corporations even though local environmental activists are targeting these institutions for their destructive environmental practices. Leaders from the grassroots may lose their links to their original constituents. NGO representatives on the global conference circuit may have no local links in the first place. Weak ties to national and local organizations, and the specialized knowledge required in the global arena, can give some groups a feeling of privilege once they have gained a seat at the negotiating table. After a while, these groups may find that they have more in common with their adversaries than with those who work for social change at home. The ability to keep a seat at the table may become more important to an organization than its willingness to respond to the needs of a constituency.

Lastly, elitism can lead to a lack of respect for geographic and political boundaries. International NGOs have been known to take action in response to a global problem such as poverty or environmental protection in a national context that is not their own. For example, lobbying by Greenpeace International against rainforest destruction in Brazil prompted a government inquiry and new restrictions on the behavior of civil society. While the international NGO can sail away, local organizations have to live with consequences that may include restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly and other civil rights. Examples of such disconnects abound and constitute a major factor in undermining the strength, influence and legitimacy of global civil society.

The second major problem facing global civil society is that networks rarely address their own internal power relations or reflect on the process of organizing. One cannot assume that global civil society is entirely democratic. The roles it has played are premised on well-developed privileges of citizenship as defined in a national political context, and while civil society has been adamant in extending the rights of citizenship into the global political arena, it has been less forthcoming in defining the responsibilities that go with them. Extending democratic principles in global governance requires that all actors in the global political arena acknowledge a balance between the rights and responsibilities of participation.

When people organize across borders on a single issue campaign like large dams or developing country debt, there are often no agreed ways to address the different levels of power that exist within the coalition. Power arises through differential proximity to decision-makers, superior forms of knowledge, access to resources, experience in organizing, and a host of other issues. Larger groups often have more power than smaller groups and organizations from the global North often have better access to powerful figures or information from official sources, but groups in the global South may have greater moral authority, access to specific details on the impacts of decisions, and sometimes better access to financial resources than their smaller counterparts from the global North.

Addressing these inequalities requires networks, coalitions and individual civil society organizations to acknowledge and deal explicitly with the difficult issues of accountability, transparency and representation within their own structures. Weak internal democracy can undermine the legitimacy of civil society organizations and global civil society as a whole. For example, NGOs from the global North that implement projects in developing countries may have only a monetary link to their supporters and no accountability at all to their intended beneficiaries. The staff of an organization may feel responsible to their Board and immediate superiors

with little or no formal accountability to members or to those who receive its services. Questions of power and process invariably arise when defining the issues to be addressed in an international campaign, in managing tensions between common values and particular circumstances, and in appointing spokespersons, claiming success, circulating information and resources, setting agendas and deciding on strategy. A failure to address power and process can lead to splintered coalitions, solutions that actually exacerbate problems in the local arena, the death or disappearance of activists working in countries that do not respect human rights, and ruined reputations (as has happened in the emergency relief field, for example, at considerable cost to fundraising and public trust). These problems can undermine the legitimacy of civil society organizations and hence the potential of global civil society to be a force for progressive social change.

One of the greatest fears associated with the rise of global civil society is a perceived propensity towards a lack of order, increasingly important in an era of terrorist organizations that operate globally and arguably are part of global civil society. While the forces of globalization have provided the opportunity for shared norms to develop, they have also thrown into stark relief worldwide differences in wealth, privilege and cultures. There is no guarantee that the rise of global civil society will result in positive social change. Civil society is not a benign sphere of like-minded organizations committed to liberal values and consensus building. It is important to emphasize, therefore, that we strengthen those global networks and associations that share values of democracy, peace and social justice. The political landscape has changed. Globalization is rearranging social space. We can only anticipate the extension of social and political battles into this new global arena. As in all political arenas, rights and justice will have to be won, and global civil society is central to this challenge.

[1]Richard Longworth, "Government without Democracy," The American Prospect 12 (2001): 20.
[2]Lisa Jordan and Peter Van Tuijl, "Political Responsibility in Transnational NGO Advocacy," *World Development* 28 (2000): 2051-2065.

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