

Globalisation and international civil society

In an increasingly globalised world, many of the key issues international civil society organisations (ICSOs) focus on – such as human rights, poverty alleviation, environmental degradation and climate change – have causes and require responses which reach beyond national borders. Tackling such issues effectively requires a globally coherent strategic framework, globally consistent advocacy, and globally synchronised and mutually reinforcing projects. However, today's ICSOs rarely have the governance and management structures necessary for effective global intervention. The main reasons for this persistent challenge are set out below.

1. ICSOs were founded as *multi-national* and not as *global* organisations

The major ICSOs were founded well before the latest and most dynamic phase of globalisation: the first ones in the middle of the 19th century (YMCA in 1849, the Red Cross in 1863); and the last in the 1960s and 70s (Amnesty International in 1961, Greenpeace in 1969, Action Aid in 1972). They usually started out as small local or national initiatives which eventually expanded to or were copied in other countries; and only once a handful or more country organisations were active, did the question of a global umbrella body arise.

As a logical consequence of this, the umbrella body's task was to keep an overview of the work which was being done by different organisations using the same name and to moderate between the sometimes conflicting interests of national affiliates. With increased globalisation, brand protection became an issue, and those who worked with international bodies such as the UN, World Bank, or IMF needed a global point of contact.

This created a new challenge, which many ICSOs still grapple with: the organisations' perspectives, distribution of roles, responsibilities and power are all framed in a multi-national, rather than a global way. Decision making often

seeks the lowest common denominator between divergent national interests, rather than aiming for the most effective global solution. Examples abound of delayed statements, or statements which did not add any value, because of the difficulties among national affiliates to reach agreement.

We often – and rightly – complain that the corporate sector wields far too much power globally. But one of the reasons why this occurs is that business is much better than the UN or ICSOs at devising global policies and mobilising power globally.

2. National charity and tax laws perpetuate the dominance of national affiliates

Usually national affiliates are legally constituted in the country where they reside and thus fall under the respective national law. In most countries this means they have to constitute a national Board which is responsible for the work of the national affiliate. This is especially challenging for the governance of finances. For instance, ICSOs active in development and poverty alleviation typically raise funds in rich countries such as the UK and Germany for projects they run in developing countries. Often such projects are co-funded by several national affiliates with each national Board being responsible for their financial contribution. This can lead to a piecemeal approach, with different donors favouring different implementation strategies and reporting requirements. This makes it difficult to find one strategically determined, consistent and effective approach globally. In addition, the national Boards' ability to block funds raised in their country gives them a quasi veto power over much of the ICSOs' global activities.

As long as governments only grant tax exemptions to organisations governed by a national Board based in their own territory, efficient and effective global programming will remain difficult. Sadly, change cannot be expected in the foreseeable future, meaning both

organisations

national and global decision makers in ICSOs will continue to struggle with the contradictions between national responsibility for fundraising and the global requirements of programming.

3. Self-disempowerment is a difficult ask

Most ICSOs' highest governing body – often a General Assembly – is largely made up of representatives of national affiliates. Thus the often competing, and sometimes conflicting, interests and world views of national affiliates shape discussions and decisions. Formally or informally, affiliates with the highest income dominate, usually those from the global North. The General Assembly elects a Board which takes on governance tasks between General Assembly meetings, and often the Board is also largely comprised of representatives of national affiliates, creating a set-up that further perpetuates national dominance on global issues.

Changing this globally ineffective approach would require replacing many representatives of national affiliates, both in the General Assembly and on the Board, with independent persons who come with a global rather than a national brief. But, given the existing distribution of power, such a change would only be possible if national affiliates would be willing to forego some of their influence and power at a global level. To pass on one's own power requires farsightedness and selflessness, two prominent qualities among the sector's key values.

ICSOs frequently criticise the UN for not being able to overcome conflicting national interests for the benefit of the world at large. Most ICSOs have the same challenge in their own organisations, and whether they will be able to advance from multi-national to truly global governance will very much shape their future relevance.

Burkhard Gnärig
Executive Director, Berlin Civil Society Center
burkhard.gnaerig@berlin-civil-society-center.org