

Between paradigms

André Proctor The CIVICUS World Assembly was an opportunity for more than 700 delegates from over 100 countries to celebrate, analyse and reflect on the growing power and influence of organized civil society in the world at local, national and, recently, global level. The mood of the Assembly strongly reflected the self-confidence of civil society organizations (CSOs) aware of the opportunities presented by the disintegration of the dominant ideological and development paradigms of the twentieth century. Yet there was also sober reflection on the implications for civil society of the major challenges of our time.

EVENT

CIVICUS World Assembly

Date 22–26 March 2004

Theme Acting together for a just world

Venue Gaborone, Botswana

Poverty and inequality are growing, repressive governments remain in many areas, and the rise of fundamentalism, intolerance, civil conflict, terrorism and the 'war against terror' reflect a new desperation of the marginalized. Add to this the catalysing effect of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The challenge facing civil society was perhaps best summed up by Mary Robinson when she called for a major rethink of globalization: 'We know what hasn't worked. We know what the problems are ... but civil society has not yet found a common voice and agenda to take to governments.'

In choosing the theme 'Acting together for a just world', the organizers attempted to frame an open and inclusive vision, identity and agenda for civil society that is based on justice as the cornerstone of human development. And it seems to work. The concept provides CSOs with a set of principles against which they can hold governments and business and each other accountable. It also defines the terms on which CSOs engage with other actors.

The four subthemes of the Assembly were civic, economic, social and political justice. Organizations working broadly within a subtheme were able to share experiences, ideas and strategies relevant to their specific focus. But there were two major crosscutting issues that dominated the discussions. One was the question of CSO engagement with government, business and multilateral agencies. The other was the issue of CSO legitimacy and accountability.

Engagement with other sectors

In both plenary sessions and workshops, delegates engaged in direct discussion with representatives of the UN, SADC and the World Bank. The discussions were, on the whole, refreshingly free of knee-jerk opposition. In workshops and plenary sessions, the modalities for cooperation with government, business and multilateral agencies were critically yet positively explored.

For many CSOs there is the realization that through mobilizing their citizen base they can stop anything, but that it is much harder to come up with realistic alternatives. For this they need to work on their own legitimacy and accountability, and engage meaningfully with the agencies that have the power and resources to realize strategies and dreams. Civil society needs to engage in the shaping of the global development agenda so that it is not dictated to us. The debate has moved from *whether* civil society should be involved to *how* to ensure that it has a direct and real voice in decision-making fora.

In this light, the Assembly affirmed the important work of bodies such as the World Bank-Civil Society 'Joint Facilitation Committee' and the UN panel of eminent persons considering UN-civil society engagement.

Relationships with government are more complex. There were a number of workshop sessions devoted to strategies for strengthening the voice of CSOs in public policy formulation. Others focused on enabling legal frameworks for CSOs and on the role of CSOs in conflict situations. CIVICUS launched its comparative study of legislative frameworks and country practices in Africa as part of its 'Civil Society Watch' programme. This programme aims to promote research and engagement strategies where civil society is under threat from undemocratic regimes.

Legitimacy and accountability

Which leads us to CSO accountability. There were no less than six specific workshops exploring aspects of this issue. The day before the Assembly itself, organizations with a specific accountability focus were invited to participate in an all-day sharing of experiences, strategies and tools to enhance CSO legitimacy and accountability.

The question in most workshops here too was not *whether* CSOs should be accountable, but *what kind* of accountability is appropriate and *how* to do it. There were calls for a more standardized approach to governance and accountability across the sector to take us beyond basic compliance. Good accountability systems are the key to mobilizing support (especially from local constituencies), attracting

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