Principles for civil society engagement with multilateralism

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As powerful multilateral bodies emerge on the global stage, in particular the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), civil society (CS) is facing new challenges. What are the implications for civil society? Will the roles and existing policy impacts of civil societies shrink or grow? Importantly, what are the BRICS’ views on civil society organizations, on global governance, and on global civil society?

This article offers a partial response to these questions in the form of principles for the engagement of civil society organizations (CSOs) with multilateralism. A major premise underlying these principles is that civil society credibility is critical to ensuring its effectiveness in advancing democratization of global governance in a shifting world.

Civil society actors working at the global level have been increasingly engaged and successful in influencing international governance through their advocacy and monitoring skills. Until recently, the key decision makers have been Northern-based governments with long-standing traditions of supporting a free and independent civil society. Decision-making powers are now shifting to countries without such traditions, and this shift brings new challenges to civil society credibility. Many international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are in fact regarded with suspicion by governments and civil society throughout the global South. INGOs are often viewed as part of a “North/South” problematic, displacing, and consequently disempowering, the leadership of local civil society.1 Indeed, large operational and advocacy INGOs have often been seen to be tools of Northern governments, parachuting their values and political priorities into emerging democracies. This perceived (or real) collusion between INGOs and Northern governmental donors detracts from CSO credibility and undermines the CS/multilateral interface.
According to FIM’s experience, the BRICS’ views on CSOs, on global governance, and on civil society can be shaped by civil society itself. Credible CS action is rooted in principles supported by extensive, practice-based, knowledge. Civil society actors who are part of the FIM network have developed *Principles for the Engagement of Civil Society Organizations with Multilateralism*. They are based in FIM’s convictions that:

a) democratized multilateralism at all levels, from regional to subglobal to global, is a necessary condition for attaining democratic global governance; and

b) active engagement of CSOs with multilateralism is essential to achieving this vision.

The principles aim to contribute positively to CSO practice and to how CSOs are viewed in a shifting world. They offer to civil society actors a distinctively civil society basis for self-reflection and discussion about their best practices and the visions and values that underpin these practices (Tandon 2009).

**Inputs to the principles**

The need for overarching principles for good practice was noted early in FIM’s history. Civil society leaders who participated at FIM’s 2000 forum (Mwangi 2000) stressed that credible and legitimate CSO activism needs to be grounded in principles that resonate in society. At FIM’s 2008 forum (Ritchie 2008), it was clear that the time had come to move beyond discussions of CS strategies and lessons learned. Participants wanted to think more broadly and articulate general principles that could underpin strategies for engagement with multilateralism. A preliminary outline of ten principles was subsequently piloted in December of 2008 in Cairo. Feedback from this session, as well as principles generated at earlier fora, were integrated, and a draft “working paper” was presented to participants at an international forum in New Delhi (FIM 2009). A second draft incorporated the new feedback, input from FIM’s Board of Directors, and general principles embedded in recurring themes in FIM’s case studies (MacKenzie 2009). Finally, thirty-two international CS lead-
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ers were surveyed for their input to this draft. The resulting principles will be further refined by civil society practitioners. Following is a brief description of each principle.  

The principles

1. That CSOs build and maintain local to global and global to local links

This principle asserts that CSOs at local and national levels constitute the broad and essential base for civil society credibility and legitimacy, and for achieving sustainable change and reform at all levels of the multilateral system. Indeed, the most significant changes occur at international as well as national levels, when reform efforts are buttressed, if not driven, by domestic, well-organized and informed civil society. Building and maintaining CSO linkages from this local base to the global arena and back to the local is fundamental to democratization of global governance. Such linkages enable a balanced flow of information and provide the overall coherence and context essential for informed action and shared guidance. These linkages are the mechanisms that allow CSOs, working at regional and global levels, to draw from local and national realities. Local to global linkages also make it possible for regional and international activists to inform activists at local levels as to how their priorities both affect, and are affected by, the broader regional and international contexts.

2. That CSOs document and disseminate their practitioner knowledge

Documentation and dissemination of CSO experience, knowledge, and lessons learned is foundational to good practice and to the democratization of global governance. CSOs need to reflect upon and learn from the past, share their lessons and strategies with the wider community, and systematically transfer this knowledge to the next generation. A recognized, valid, and legitimate practitioner knowledge base is essential for CSOs to be able to communicate effectively within the diversity of its own sector and beyond. CSOs require capacities to conscientiously document and share their experience and knowledge in forms that are widely accessible.
3. That CSOs embrace the full diversity of their sector

Democratization of global governance is a civil society objective, approached from a diversity of civil society perspectives, and spanning local to global levels. This diversity is civil society’s defining quality and strength. Full inclusion of all voices and levels and of the ever-increasing diversity of civil society’s issues, causes, and points of view is a necessary condition for achieving democratic global governance. This principle also recognizes that the complexity of diversity and the demands of inclusiveness can create tensions that slow progress. To address this reality, and to enable CSOs to release the full power and strength of their diversity, CSOs require the capacity to communicate, collaborate and negotiate across its sector. To value civil society diversity is to value and empower civil society as a multifaceted sector that includes, but is not limited to, CS organizations, coalitions, alliances, and networks.

4. That CSOs understand the broad context of global governance

Democratization of global governance is a systemic project where all seemingly separate issues are part of a larger, interrelated whole. The capacity of CSOs to understand and to work within this broad political, social, and economic context is essential to the achievement of democratic global governance. These contexts include the diverse and changing social and political realities of people living and working in their communities, the academic community, individual governments, donors, and other actors engaged in democratization of global governance. CSOs must also be aware of, and sensitive to, the various linkages and interrelationships amongst these contexts. Critically, in order to influence multilateral policies, programmes, and practices, CSOs must understand multilateralism as a concept and phenomenon as well as the specific multilateral agencies and representatives that they wish to influence.

5. That CSOs are willing and able to engage, and to disengage, diplomatically with those who do not share their vision of the common good

In addition to advocacy, CSOs require diplomacy capacities that will enable them to engage directly with those persons or institutions with which they might otherwise avoid dialogue. In the face of an increasingly
complex and globalized world, CSOs need to be able to engage, as credible and legitimate “civil society diplomats.” CSOs must be willing and able to work directly with those who do not share their vision, including governments, multilateral bodies, corporations, institutions and individuals, in order to constructively address global concerns and to prevent the tragedies and global crises that CSOs, working locally, are often the first to experience and to predict.

6. That CSOs are actively committed to their long-term vision and goals

Sustained change and measurable progress toward the vision of democratization of global governance can take years and even generations. Hence, CSO commitment over the long term is essential. This principle values CSO patience and persistence. It warns of the danger and counterproductiveness of cynicism that can take hold of beleaguered civil society activists. It also stresses the importance for CSOs to challenge and change their own policies and practices, as well as the policies and practices of donor communities, which focus on short-term results only and ignore or devalue the long-term vision and goals of democratization.

7. That CSOs are open and transparent about whom they represent and to whom they are accountable

CSO openness, honesty, and transparency regarding whom they represent and to whom they are accountable are critical to establishing and maintaining CSO legitimacy and credibility. Civil society practitioners and their organizations, alliances, and networks should be rigorous in identifying and communicating whom they represent and to whom they are accountable. CSOs represent those who have mandated them to carry out their mission. This includes memberships, constituencies, and Boards of Directors or overseers. Thus, within the democratic context, CSOs are accountable to those they can claim to represent and, conversely, CSOs represent those to whom they are accountable.

8. That CSOs align their practice with their values

It is imperative for CSOs to articulate their ideals and values, to champion the highest standards of conduct, and to strive consciously and systemat-
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ically to meet these standards. We recognize that the actions of civil society activists and CSOs are not always consistent with their stated goals and values. Practice, unlike theory, is affected by complex contextual factors and does not always fully reflect the principles and ideals of civil society actors or CSOs. Alignment of CSO practices, policies, and values is achieved through ongoing self-assessment, evaluation, and improvement.

Reflections on the value of the principles project to civil society capacity building and credibility

The BRICS is quickly taking its place as an influential, Southern-based multilateral grouping. The emergence of this body presents a new opportunity for civil society in BRICS countries to have a stronger voice at regional and global levels. Principles for CSO engagement with multilateralism point to good practices that are based in well-established lessons and can help to optimize civil society participation in such power shifts. Each of the eight principles can be applied to help inform CSO strategy and actions.

Principle #1 for example: “That CSOs build and maintain local to global and global to local links” situates indigenous civil society, grounded in the realities of their local and national priorities and struggles, as the source of civil society credibility and legitimacy. A strong local civil society base in the BRICS countries is essential to building robust local to global and global to local links. CSOs in Brazil, India, and South Africa are well established in activism at local levels and independent CSOs in China and Russia are also advancing in their capacities to influence their governance. With the coming together of the BRICS grouping, these actors are now challenged to scale up their capacities to influence their own governance.

At the same time, the numbers of subsidiary arms to Northern-based INGOs is growing in the BRICS countries. These organizations can pose obstacles to building indigenous capacities. CSOs in these countries are concerned that INGO subsidiaries will displace established indigenous civil society, particularly in their efforts to gain access to the BRICS. Indeed, given their heavy investments in the global South, it is often
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easier for large INGOs to meet with national governments than it is for the poorer, local CSOs.

It is critical for advancing the project of democratization that CSOs, indigenous to the BRICS countries, along with the large INGOS who have traditionally dominated the global governance discourse, heed lessons learned on the essential requirement of a strong local base from which to effectively (and credibly) influence multilateralism. CSOs in the BRICS countries must increase their participation in global governance by building sustainable relationships with the BRICS multilateral grouping. Large, richer transnational NGOs can contribute to strengthening indigenous CSO capacities to shape their own destinies. Transferring their experience and knowledge on monitoring and advocacy, along with providing needed financial resources will serve to build the free and independent (global) civil society required to further the democratization of global governance in a shifting world.

The ongoing process of developing and refining principles for the engagement of CSOs with multilateralism is, in itself, a learning and professional development opportunity for civil society actors, including the FIM Board and staff. The development process was a valuable opportunity to revisit and clarify together concepts such as “democratization of global governance,” “representivity,” “accountability,” and “inclusivity.” It was clear that busy CSO leaders would like more time for such reflections and more opportunities for dialogue: to “think about principles as activist” and “help [us] to understand [our] context.”

Notes

1. Even in Japan, this problem has rapidly emerged. In the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami that in 2011 devastated east Japan, a leading Japanese NGO coalition circulated a request to the INGO community that it work closely and in coordination with local Japanese NGOs and limit the number of staff deployed to the affected regions to avoid displacing local resources. See “Recommendations to the International NGOs for Disaster Activities in East Japan;” http://www.japanplatform.org/E/donate/jp_eq_tsunami20110321.pdf (accessed November 30, 2011).

2. FIM Forum for Democratic Global Governance (FIM) was established in 1998 as an international, knowledge-based, Non Governmental Organization. We are a non-aligned convening body with a small secretariat located in Montréal, Canada. We do not participate in direct advocacy. FIM strongly supports the inherent value and importance of multilateralism, and of the inclusion of the missing voices of civil society, to the democratization of the multilateral system. Our activities are focused on opening spaces for civil society dialogue on democratic global governance and
The implications of the growing clout of emerging powers on mobilizing knowledge about the civil society interface with global governance. FIM supports the development and dissemination of civil society practitioner experience and knowledge. We commission practitioner case studies and project-based research and convene global civil society conferences and forums. Our growing expertise is in facilitation of informal dialogue and “civil society diplomacy” between civil society leaders and governmental and multilateral actors. For example, FIM convened the first dialogues between civil society leaders (the majority from the global South) and the G8 (Martin 2008) and the G20 (FIM 2010).

3. FIM is grateful to Kumi Naidoo and Siddharth Bannerjee for their extensive contributions to the development of this first draft.

4. Draft principles were presented at a meeting of Building Bridges: Engaging civil society from Muslim countries and communities with the multilateral sphere, an ongoing FIM project. The Cairo meeting included civil society leaders from CSOs in Egypt, India, Pakistan, Bahrain, and Bangladesh.


References


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