Thoughts on Civil G8 in 2008 and Beyond

CS Meeting(s) with G8 Sherpas

These are some thoughts on how to proceed on what now appears to be the tradition of an annual meeting between civil society (CS) participants and the G8 Sherpas. I will refer only briefly to other CS/G8 opportunities, such as parallel meetings, meetings with heads of State, etc. I think that the timing of this reflection is important since we need to begin planning for Japan now, and I sense an openness of approach by Japanese organizers that may give us a window of opportunity for change and/or consolidation.

This is a first draft only and I hope that it can be used as a starting point only. Your comments and improvements will be gladly received.

These thoughts are triggered in part by what I see as a down turn in 07 in Bonn, which in some ways can be seen as part of a larger shift that began as early as 2005. I will, however, concentrate on forward looking elements rather than retrospective critiques and I look forward to comments, suggested improvements and, in general, open discussion amongst those of us who have an interest in this process.

In the period since 2002, we have tried two approaches with Sherpas. The first is a large relatively open meeting in which up to several hundred CS participants observe an exchange between a limited number of CS colleagues and the Sherpas. The second is a smaller discreet meeting, behind closed doors, between less than 20 CS participants and the Sherpas and in which the content is shared more or less confidentially.

Both of these types of meetings have their advantages and disadvantages. Before elaborating on this however, we first need to reflect on the question. Why are we meeting the Sherpas and what do we expect from them?

Expectations; from CS? From Sherpas?
From the outset, CS participants have collaborated with the hope of eventually achieving two major expected results from this dialogue. We want to influence 1) the choice of the G8 agenda and 2) the content of the G8 agenda. To achieve either of these objectives necessitates complex preparations in establishing timelines, in ensuring appropriate and effective knowledgeable content, and in finalizing a politically astute selection of CS participants.

While the role of CS participants is relatively clear, what do we expect from the Sherpas? Do we expect them to a) share with us as much as is possible their up to date plans and their expectations for the G8 meeting? b) take immediate and public decisions regarding our recommendations and/or suggestions? c) simply listen attentively to our inputs, take note of them and somehow absorb them into their own reflections and preparations.

I would recommend that whichever group meets with the Sherpas in 2008 think carefully about their expectations from the Sherpas and that when some kind of internal consensus is achieved, it be communicated clearly to the Sherpas.

In my view, of the above three Sherpa expectations, the second, b) is unrealistic, whereas a) and c) are both valuable and possible.
When we once asked a senior official why the Sherpas would want to meet with CS, his answer was instructive. The Sherpas, he said, hope that by meeting with CS representatives, they will be able to identify issues of emerging importance.

**Timelines**
This has been a difficult issue for both the Sherpas and civil society, although there now seems to be progress for dealing with it. The main problem is that official planning jurisdiction for a host country begins only on January 1 of their hosting year. As a result, upcoming hosts are reluctant to take any official decisions in advance of that date since it could be interpreted as a criticism or suggested improvement on the functioning of the current G8 host.

Often the host county Sherpa is only selected after the January 1 date and his/her arrival at such a late date can signal important changes in direction, which, in turn, must be deliberated upon by the CS organizers.

Nevertheless, CS has no choice but to begin planning well in advance of the January 1 date. As our credibility grows within the Sherpa system, we are increasingly able now to get glimpses in advance of which agenda issues are under consideration and we can plan accordingly. Our first objective should be to be sufficiently advanced in our own planning so as to be able to influence the selection of the agenda itself.

Once the agenda is finalized, we need to be able to put a group together quickly enough so as to be able to influence the final content of the agenda. Broadly speaking, we need to have our team and positions ready and be able to meet with the Sherpas by mid-spring. Once the G8 programme has been finalized, and subsequent CS activities must really concentrate on long-term strategies, since it is already too late to influence that year’s G8 meeting.

**Number of Meetings with Sherpas in 08**
I would recommend that CS organizers negotiate for two and possibly three meetings with the Sherpas in the lead up to July/08.

One can be a large meeting in which some pre-selected questions and proposals are shared in front of a couple of hundred of, largely Japanese, NGO participants and observers. This type of meeting has three main benefits; firstly, it gives all Sherpas a sense of the breadth of civil engagement in Japan and the common social concerns that are shared by extensive and diverse elements of the host country. Secondly, it gives a rare chance for Japanese CS thinkers, practitioners and participants and activists to see at close hand the deliberations of the most senior elements of the G8. Thirdly, it gives Japanese CS a chance to demonstrate to all G8 Sherpas, as well as to visiting CS participants, what issues weigh most heavily throughout Japanese civil society.

In my view, the second priority meeting should be a direct and closed meeting between participants from Southern CS and the Sherpas. Many of the G8 agreements have a considerable and direct impact on the South. It is therefore essential that Sherpas hear the views of CS activists from southern civil societies. Although the G8 is increasingly including Southern political leaders from the South and although Northern G8 CS participants can be a friendly and supportive voice for their colleagues from the South, neither of these options has the impact of direct face to face contact.

Thirdly, it is possible also to convene a second discreet meeting between a small group of CS participants from within the G8 countries and/or other Northern countries. In my view, this is the lowest priority of the three, since all G8 Sherpas have ample opportunity to consult in depth with their respective civil societies.
CS Planning Time
Normally, CS is at a planning disadvantage compared to the Sherpas. The Sherpas meet on a regular basis and although there are new additions almost every year, there is a core group each year which allows for strong continuity.

On the other hand, depending upon the host country and depending upon the actual G8 agenda topics, there may be large variation of CS participants from year to year. Lack of continuity has surfaced as an issue of concern and this concern begins with our capacity to plan. We should assume that several selected participants will not have met with Sherpas before and also that many of the participants will not know each other nor have collaborated previously.

As a result, in order to prepare for such a high-level meeting. The group that is meeting with sherpas should spend a couple of planning days together. For financial and timing reasons this would best occur in the two days previous to the actual Sherpa meeting. This may seem last-minute, but if preparatory communications has been strong from the organizers and if the selected participants have the required skills and experience, 2 working days will be sufficient; sufficient to identify spokespeople, but also to identify common positions on the main topics to be discussed.

Neutral Chair
Previous meetings have included neutral chairs (Canada, Britain), co-chairs (France, Germany), and NGO chairs (Russia).

The most effective, from a CS viewpoint, is a neutral chair. This is not necessarily appreciated by the Sherpas, since a genuinely neutral chair can ensure that the Sherpas avoid ambiguous or evasive answers. A respected journalist is possibly the ideal chair. They are not intimidated by the seniority of the Sherpas, nor should they bring a vested interest or biased line of questioning. They also have no hesitation to ensure that CS inputs are clear and respectful.

Expected Length of Meetings/ Number of Topics on Agenda
Although we have had up to three hours available for at least two previous meetings, there is increasing pressure on the use of the Sherpas' time. It will probably be realistic to expect a meeting with the Sherpas to be of two hours. From our point of view, this should be the minimum time we agree to.

In some ways, the more important issue is how much time we spend per topic. Clearly the choice of agenda lies with the CS organizers. I would recommend that there be a maximum of one topic per hour of meeting. In fact, although this has not yet been done, we may decide to discuss only one topic, be it for 2 or 3 hours. The key is to have a chance to explore a priority issue(s) in depth.

Selection of CS Participants
For CS organizers this is, inevitably, a major challenge, especially for a small group of 15-20 participants. One source of pressure is ‘political’. The organizers want to be seen to be fair, inclusive and credible. There is also inevitable pressure on organizers to ensure that the group is ‘representative’. This latter objective can be especially important for some Sherpas who want to be able to say, and believe, that they have consulted with a broad representation of civil society.

In my view, for CS to seek or to claim broad representivity is a dangerous trap. Within the G8 democracies the heads of state are themselves the representatives of those who elect them from within a context of universal suffrage. No CSO can make that claim. Every citizen has a
legitimate right to participate in democratic decision-making and CSOs' credibility can come from many sources other than through 'representing' a large block of people.

As a result, selecting participants for a Sherpa meeting based on their representative strengths, is not for me a top priority. Since the Sherpas are looking for insights more than for political security, participants should be chosen on the basis of their knowledge, and/or their diplomatic and negotiation skills. Ideally, in my view, they should participate in their own right and not be tied down by the institutional interests of their employer. Clearly, this type of meeting does not allow CS participants to go back to their Board members or senior colleagues in order to verify possible discussion points with them. They must be free to give the best advice they can and to do so within the context of senior-level diplomacy.

The overall composition of the selected CS group must, however, respect minimum representivity. There must be gender balance, there must be participants from different regions of the world, and there must be participants who bring content expertise regarding the issue to be discussed.

CS Spokespeople

Normally, CS introduces a topic, and the Sherpas respond accordingly. To date, there have been 2 distinct approaches to presenting the issues; in most years the CS group has selected from amongst its members a spokesperson to introduce the topic for about 10 minutes. Another approach has been to allow each of the participants to speak to a pre-selected theme or to a theme of their choice.

I strongly favour the former approach. Assuming that CS participants will limit the topics to one per hour, then only one or two people need to be identified to present the issues. In addition, someone should be selected to give an overall introduction and a second participant can make the closing statement.

Although this may seem somewhat arbitrary, the wisdom of the group in selecting spokespersons can usually be relied upon. This is especially true if there has been sufficient planning time among group participants to get a sense of the respective talents of their colleagues.

Long-term Continuity

In both the Russia and German CS gatherings, there were strong calls for ensuring long-term continuity of this unique process. To date, nothing is in place although the political will seems to exist amongst all of those who follow the G8.

As a result CS is in constant danger of reinventing the wheel each year and of not being able to benefit from difficult lessons learned in previous years.

It appears now to be essential to establish a permanent planning/advisory CS body. It appears as if we have now reached the point where each host country’s CS system is willing and able to do the specific planning for a series of CS events during their hosting year. A more permanent advisory body would not displace this group, but it could be responsible for two main functions. Obviously it could second members to the host countries planning process in order to offer whatever advice might be considered helpful. We should assume that since there will always be an 8 year gap for a given host country, that by the time a G8 hosting year arrives, there will it be a loss of institutional memory from the previous experience, plus, the context of any meeting will have changed dramatically over the intervening 8 years.
Secondly, this body should take prime responsibility for the official sherpa/CS meetings. The national civil society system, with international advisors is clearly best positioned to plan the overall activities for their hosting year. They also must be represented in the permanent planning committee, (This committee will by necessity have an agreed-upon policy of rotating membership)

**Financing**

We cannot realistically expect, nor desire, a long-term financial commitment from the G8 system for any form of CS activity, including a standing committee. For many reasons, financial support will be determined anew each year, by each successive host country.

This obviously affects each year’s host country CS planning and it certainly affects the financial requirements of a standing CS body. Since CS does not want to encourage any form of G8 institutionalization, our best recourse is to obtain private financing for a standing committee.

I would recommend that, if this year’s host CS agrees, that we begin immediately to research the possibility of exterior financial support for a standing CS committee. Ideally funding should come from diverse sources within and outside of G8 member states, including Foundations and the private sector and not excluding sympathetic non-G8 states.

**Parallel CS Events**

Clearly, there is growing interest throughout CS with the G8 process. The CS presence at the G8 itself will grow, the G8 parallel conferences should grow from strength to strength, and hopefully CS meetings with G8 heads of state will also grow.

The standing advisory body in collaboration with each year’s host CS should attempt to ensure some form of collaboration amongst these growing efforts. While our diversity remains our strength, it also can be our weakness and without resorting to censorship in any way, we will need to find ways to keep focus and intensify our influence.

**Giving Legitimacy to the G8**

Any democratically accountable head of state has the legitimate right to consult/collaborate with other heads of state. In this respect the G8 has legitimacy and as a major, yet informal gathering, it does exercise sufficient influence as to warrant full scale attention by international CS.

The G8 has no legitimacy however, to function as a global governance mechanism. By entering into dialogue with the G8, we run a certain risk of giving the G8 unwarranted legitimacy and permanence.

For those reasons we need to ensure that we keep this relationship informal, with all of the obvious logistical difficulties that result. In our planning and in our substantive recommendations we must always avoid inadvertantly giving the G8 more power that it has now. We cannot ask the G8 for sustained financial support, we cannot insist that the G8 take on responsibly for functions which are better served by the totality of nations, through the UN for example, but we can ask them to use their influence in a way in which we view as being positive, as a way to strengthen, rather than weaken democratic global governance.

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