Global civil society

The role of UK civil society in a rapidly globalising world

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About the Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland

The Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society was established to explore how civil society could be strengthened in the UK and Ireland. The Inquiry Commission was chaired by Geoff Mulgan and was also informed by an International Advisory Group.

The objectives of the Inquiry were to:

- explore the possible threats to and opportunities for civil society, looking out to 2025;
- identify how policy and practice can be enhanced to help strengthen civil society;
- enhance the ability of civil society associations to shape the future.

The Inquiry Commission's work began with an extensive futures exercise to explore possible futures for civil society. Drawing on the findings of the futures work, which are documented in two reports, *The Shape of Civil Society to Come* and *Scenarios for Civil Society*, the Inquiry Commission agreed to explore the current and possible future roles of civil society associations in relation to the following themes:

- **Growing a more civil economy**
- **A rapid and just transition to a low carbon economy**
- **Democratising media ownership and content**
- **Growing participatory and deliberative democracy**

This paper was commissioned to inform the Inquiry's work on the roles of civil society associations in growing a participatory and deliberative democracy.

The final report of the Inquiry Commission, *Making good society*, was published in March 2010.

For further information about the Inquiry and to download related reports go to **www.futuresforcivilsociety.org**

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Executive summary

Humanity is grappling with a perfect storm of convergent crises - from the implosion of the global financial system to the escalating poverty pandemic, from the threats of terrorism, trafficking and organised crime to escalating concerns over energy security and climate change. Instead of driving greater global solidarity, these complex challenges are deepening social inequality and widening the chasm between the global North and South.

Many decent men and women are trying to respond to each of these crises at the local, national and global level. As weak multilateral institutions and self-interested governments consistently fail to meet the needs and expectations of their citizens, civil society has emerged as a contender to fill the global leadership vacuum.

This paper by Kumi Naidoo examines why - despite all this citizen mobilisation - humanity is still failing to deliver solutions commensurate with the urgency and scale of the global challenges we face. It outlines the tensions and contradictions of power and privilege that exist between civil society in the North and South. Setting the role of UK civil society organisations in a global context, it aims to determine the responsibilities of UK civil society in supporting social movements in other countries with weaker democratic traditions and fewer resources at their disposal.

1. The new global context

The failed promise of globalisation

 After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, there was a surge of optimism and a new sense of global solidarity. Civil society activists saw the end of state-sponsored communism as an opportunity to breathe new life into democracy around the world. The military expenditure that rocketed during the Cold War could now be diverted towards social welfare. In the early 1990s, Lester Salamon, director of the Center for Civil Society Studies at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies , spoke of 'a global associational revolution' and Jessica Matthews, President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, spoke of a 'power shift' that would lead to an explosion of democracy, with non-state actors taking on an active role in shaping government policy.

This optimism was sadly short lived. In many respects, the intensification of globalisation during this period did usher in a new era of interdependence. From the foods we eat to the economic and political systems we are part of, our societies, lives and livelihoods have become intertwined to a much greater degree. Paradoxically, this interdependence has not translated into greater global solidarity. The world is fragmenting rather than uniting: more fault lines are emerging, internal and regional conflicts are intensifying, and North-South divisions are deepening.

Economic globalisation has created more losers than winners. With the exception of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), there have been few other developing countries that can show significant progress in terms of social and economic development and indeed the gap between rich and poor nations has widened. The recent financial crisis has provided a pretext for governments to cut back overseas development assistance. Furthermore, the gap between the rich and poor has also widened in virtually every country in both the developed north and the developing south. Poverty and inequality are pervasive not only in developing countries, but in affluent countries too. According to the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation, 1.02 billion people around the world are undernourished. That is one sixth of humanity – more than ever before.

The new threats to global security – climate change, contagious diseases, trafficking, trans-national crime, terrorism and extreme poverty – all call for collective responses. None of these problems can be effectively addressed by any one country or region in isolation. These global challenges call for new and innovative forms of governance and leadership. Unfortunately, the international community has not risen to this challenge. The G20's failure to deliver a convincing, coordinated response to the global financial crisis and the protracted bickering and stalling in UN negotiations to agree a successor to the Kyoto Protocol are painful proof that national self-interest and short-term economic gains are still the determining factors in international relations.

The global governance gap

Today, we are stuck in the geo-politics of 1945. Multilateral institutions are skewed in favour of a handful of powerful elites. Arrangements to regulate global markets, global institutions, and global production rest – at best – on the thinnest consent of the affected publics. Governments of developing countries are as much to blame for this inequity as those of more prosperous nations. In the developing world, too many governments are weak, corrupt, and out of step with their own electorates' views of the global imperatives.

The growing militarisation of geopolitics has exacerbated the global democratic deficit: states are willing to resort to aggressive means to promote their interests, effectively bypassing and undermining established mechanisms for the multilateral resolution of conflicts. It is now clear that the Security Council of the United Nations was bypassed in the rush to invade Iraq by the UK and US governments, in the UK case defying the advice of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office's own legal advisers. We are seeing an intensification of military conflict, terrorist attacks, and violent fundamentalism.

While public engagement can have a tangible impact on national and global policy, attempts by civil society groups to challenge the inequities, which in some cases has been exacerbated by neo-liberal globalisation has not delivered the kind of structural changes in governance that civil society has sought. Civil society activism has not yet translated into fundamental

reforms of multilateral policy or governance structures. In fact, the current global governance frameworks reflect the geopolitics of mid-1940s when institutions such as the World Bank, IMF and the United Nations were formed in the aftermath of the second world war and reflected the power politics of that time.

Can civil society fill the global leadership vacuum?

Taken together, these trends threaten to squeeze the space for civil society and to undermine the robustness of democracy and public participation worldwide. This is particularly alarming against the post-Cold War backdrop, when the promise of a 'peace dividend' was realised through a series of citizen revolutions that occurred from the Soviet Union to South Africa. Two decades later, this peace dividend has all but disappeared.

On the other hand, as public trust in politics has been eroded, civil society is gaining global influence. Global civil society has proven to be robust, diverse and creative in responding to the rising levels of frustration, anger, and impatience with the injustices people are forced to live with. Countless physical and electronic networks of activists have been built over the past decade, using new technology and communications tools to reach wider audiences and build greater consensus than ever before.

Yet for many of the most pressing issues facing individuals and communities, real power is moving further and further away from ordinary people. Global activism reflects this shift from the national to the regional and global level. During the 1980s, many activists embraced the slogan: "Think globally, act locally". By the mid-'90s, activists from the South began to realise that we should instead: "Think locally, act globally". One of the ironies of the moment of world history that we find ourselves in was that precisely at the time many countries were securing electoral democracy either for the first time or after a long hiatus dominated by military dictatorships as was the case of many countries in Africa and Latin America real power was shifting from the national to the global levels. Civil society activists in the South therefore recognise that they have to struggle on many fronts: locally, provincially, nationally, regionally (especially with the emergence of stronger regional intergovernmental organisations such as the European Union and the African Union) and internationally, where decisions that are made or not made by organisations such as the World Bank, IMF, WTO and the United Nations and its

agencies, have a huge impact on the lives of people all over the world. Civil society's participation can help close the gaping democratic deficit at the global level.

Civil society's infiltration of the institutions of global governance has had a positive impact. Never before has there been such widespread, sustained and truly global citizen mobilisation around issues like climate change and poverty. Yet, there is a huge difference between access and influence. More often than not simply having access to those in power from the national to the global levels simply means that we might have half a seat at the table; that we might have a few minutes to speak and share our views but we are not necessarily listened to. Yet, global governance bodies, such as the United Nations know very well that it needs civil society. Acting in partnership with the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) in October 2009, more than 173 million people gathered at over 3000 events in 120 countries, demanding that their governments "Stand Up, Take Action, End Poverty Now!" This set a world record for the largest mobilisation in history and helped breathe life into the UN Millennium Development Goals that were adopted at the Millennium Summit in September 2000. However, these mobilisations are invariably aimed at influencing policy not structures.

It is important to note that only a few UK civil society organisations have forcefully challenged the democratic deficit that underscores global governance institutions. Part of the problem is that all the contradictions, inequalities, and power differentials that exist in global society inevitably also manifest themselves in global civil society. For example, while British NGO activists would rarely need a visa to attend an international conference, activists from developing countries find it incredibly difficult, expensive and often demeaning to access developed countries, including the United Kingdom. According to Professor Alan Fowler, a development analyst, since the advent of the so-called "war on terror" we have witnessed the "curtailment of international civic mobility". Again, civil society voices in the UK could and should be louder in the condemnation of the obstacles that civil society activists face in gaining entry for legitimate purposes, seemingly because of racial and religious profiling that was part of the package of responses that came with the ill-conceived war on terror.

Furthermore, there is a two tiered system in terms of compensation for activists in the developed and developing world. Most Southern NGOs are heavily dependent on donors from the North, which

makes equal partnerships almost impossible. Such dynamics make civil society organisations (CSOs) susceptible to similar weaknesses as the institutions they criticise. If civil society is to be an effective, legitimate and accountable player in global politics at the global level the inequalities in power between North and South civil societies need to be addressed. Civil society must demonstrate that international relations need not be shaped predominantly by national and organisational power and self-interest.

As civil society has come to adopt a more prominent role in public affairs, governments, corporations and multilateral bodies are under greater pressure to be held accountable for their actions and uphold their obligations towards the public good. However, civil society organisations must also make themselves more accountable and transparent. Failure to do so will invite criticism that CSOs do not practice what they preach. Business leaders have pointed out that it is hypocritical for CSOs to push for compulsory accountability frameworks while their own sector relies on voluntary codes. While government and for-profit organisations must carry a greater level of accountability, it is critically important that civil society does not take public trust for granted and build on some innovative and ground breaking attempts at greater public accountability such as the International NGO Accountability Charter.

The critical legitimacy issue for civil society is to ensure that organisations are accountable towards the communities they serve - especially the vulnerable and marginalised communities that tend to be physically and figuratively distant from decision-making processes. However, it is vital that civil society groups do not become too inward-looking about accountability, or too bogged down in bureaucracy. It is important to keep perspective not just on our own accountability but also on our role in holding others to account.

2. Britain's role in the world

Some of the most innovative global activism and most talented leaders have emerged from British civil society. Many high profile international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) such as Oxfam, Save the Children, and Friends of the Earth were either founded or have a substantial presence in the UK. Global campaigns such as the Jubilee Debt Campaign and the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) both had strong involvement and leadership from UK civil society.

The long shadow of the British Empire

Despite these success stories, there are shortcomings in the way British civil society operates in the global context. In examining what UK civil society can do to advance and enhance global civil society, we must understand the inordinate power that Britain wields in the world for a country of its size. Britain has a seat at every powerful institution in the global governance arena. The UK is a key member of the G8, the G20, and – as one of only five countries with the right to veto - the UN Security Council. Britain exercises major influence over the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Britain's economic importance - though in decline is still maintained partly due to its colonial past. The British Empire may be long gone, but Britain's global influence remains disproportionately strong.

This colonial legacy presents a particular set of challenges and responsibilities in terms of global advocacy and North-South relations. As a consequence of Britain's colonial reach, UK civil society has an extensive network of relationships with civil society in the developing world. These ties often run deeper than with civil society in other developed countries. For example, UK-based international NGOs have a good track record of continuing engagement with local communities in conflict zones, when other international aid organisations have pulled out.

On the other hand, Britain's imperialist exploits have bred mistrust in developing countries, which complicates prospects for cooperation on an equal footing. This mistrust is not unfounded. Colonialist attitudes are still pervasive in Britain's political establishment. Subliminal racism remains a factor in terms of how resources are allocated, especially when it comes to overseas development assistance.

Bilateral agencies, such as the UK government's Department for International Development (DFiD), place stringent conditionalities on poor countries to enable them to access the meagre aid that is allocated. Recently, however, the UK has taken the lead at the level of discourse to untie aid and have made the appropriate policy statements as part of the aid effectiveness effort by the OECD. Yet, there appears to be a major gap between rhetoric and reality. Most of this money is not delivered directly to the constituencies for whom it is intended, but is 'filtered' through British or international organisations.

In 2008/09, DfID spent 41% of its £6.306 billion budget on the central funding of multilateral organisations (including the EU, UN, and World Bank). A further £317 million was passed through UK-based NGOs who work in the developing world, , including Oxfam UK, Save the Children UK, ActionAid and Christian Aid, who have a long-standing relationship with DFiD. While they can access these funds relatively easily (even though recently such organisations are being challenged to show results and impact) and spend them as they see fit, their partner organisations in the South are put under enormous pressure to report progress and demonstrate impact in the name of transparency and accountability. In essence what we have is a delegated conditionality situation, where some conditions are put on the recipient UK NGOs that then feel obliged to put in place, sometimes demeaning mechanisms of accountability from southern CSOs perspective, yet the language of "partnership" still is used yet sounds increasingly hollow.

Impact assessment can give some indication of the effectiveness of programmes and allows organisations to evaluate, learn from mistakes and make improvements. Yet there are a number of difficulties with using 'impact' as the main frame of reference for civil society accountability. Impact can be hard to trace, and harder to attribute. As Albert Einstein put it: "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted".

Caroline Harper, Chief Executive of Sightsavers, points to the hypocrisy of some NGOs "who write standards

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for partners or suppliers of goods which we know we couldn't meet ourselves. We need to work more on our own internal structures and accountability, as we continue to demand complete transparency and accountability from our partners in the South."

It is important to note that several smaller UK NGOs who also are engaged in international solidarity efforts feel excluded from resourcing by the government, even though some funding windows on a much more modest level is open to them. Yet, it is encouraging to see that there has been a significant growth of efforts of smaller or lesser high profile CSOs from the UK who have become more engaged with southern CSOs within a framework of what has been sometimes called people to people solidarity.

A democracy of double standards

If Britain's past and present power begets a duty to exercise responsible global leadership, unfortunately its standing in the world community over the past two decades has been at best ambivalent and at worst schizophrenic.

When the Labour party came into power in 1997, Robin Cook, then Foreign Secretary, said: "Britain's foreign policy moving forward, unlike the Tories in the past, should be based on a deep respect for human rights." This created much optimism in the developing world, particularly among civil society activists, who believed that the British government had finally caught up with the sentiments of its citizens, who were overwhelmingly in favour of policies to protect human rights, promote democracy and eradicate poverty.

During the last decade, Britain's interventionist foreign policy - sometimes in violation of international law - has not only undermined national and global security, but also provoked accusations of double standards. Despite claiming to promote democracy abroad, we have seen a steady decline in the British government's adherence to democratic practice at both home and internationally.

The marginalisation of dissent

The systematic erosion of civil liberties has taken various guises, ranging from engaging in racial and religious profiling to an unfair immigration policy; undermining the rule of law by implicitly legitimising torture in collusion with the CIA's rendition programme and seeking to pass legislation that would enable lengthy detention without trial; an endemic culture of surveillance through the

proliferation of CCTV cameras (each Briton averages 300 CCTV appearances a day), as well as the proposed introduction of a compulsory National DNA Database and micro-chipped identity cards.

Despite these many infringements of civil liberties, human rights are not central to political debate in the UK and many UK citizens do not seem to feel that human rights legislation is relevant to them and their lives. This disconnect makes British citizens less sensitive to human rights abuses abroad. Consequently, there is a worrying lack of awareness of the fact that the decline of democratic practice in the UK has undermined democracy globally, and inhibited associational life in countries with younger and weaker democratic traditions. This compromises the work of civil society organisations in developing countries, particularly those working on human rights advocacy, especially since many of these organisations might be recipient of UK sources of funding. The Robert Mugabe regime, among others, have been quick to point out that many human rights violations have been conducted in the last decade by countries that would like to see themselves as exporters of democracy. Some commentators in developing countries have noted that the approach successive UK governments have taken can be encapsulated as: "do as we say, not as we do". Britain's approach to multilateralism seems to be "let's have our cake and eat it" - maintaining its privileged position in international institutions, while advocating equality and shared responsibility.

In the last eight years, the discourse of the so-called 'War on Terror', the curtailment of civil liberties, and the shrinking of democratic space has put pressures on the political space in which civil society operates. According, to CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Action (www.civicus.org) at least 60 countries around the world have passed or proposed laws that restrict the role of citizens' groups, citing the threat of terrorism to justify these measures. Instead of bringing greater security, undemocratic measures taken to 'protect democracy' have stoked a violent backlash. Divisive pronouncements by former US President George W. Bush - "You're either with us or against us" – have only fuelled fundamentalism and provided justification for regimes of all types to crack down on legitimate civil society activities. The close alliance between Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George Bush has associated some of the greater excesses and abuse of democratic standards by the Bush administration, with the UK government.

3. UK civil society in the global context

UK civil society does not only have a vital role to play in lobbying for justice at the global level; it can also inspire behavioural change in the UK in the interest of people in less developed countries. Although many successful campaigns have raised awareness of global issues like climate change in Britain, UK civil society faces a number of contextual and structural challenges that weaken its contribution to Southern civil society.

A disjointed approach to local and global issues

UK civil society is divided into two 'tribes': those that focus on international development and those that focus on domestic issues. There are very few meaningful relationships between these two communities, though there are growing signs of optimism following such appeals from CSO activists from the south. This disjointed approach has led to a compartmentalisation of interconnected issues, which excludes a range of possibilities for mutual support and multiplying messages.

For example, there is a tendency in international development circles to assume that the global division of rich and poor runs more or less along the lines of the North-South divide. This is a fallacy. In the struggle to end global poverty, we have failed to acknowledge that the reality for the urban poor in the UK is not too different from that of the rural poor in the developing world. It is a reality that dictates a complete inability for the working poor to create change for themselves and to change the dynamic for future generations. While the scale of economic exclusion is of course significantly more deep and harsh in developing countries, there is no question that there are growing numbers of people in developed countries who are being socially and economically excluded by experiencing deep and growing inequalities in access to education, jobs and other social services.

Most of the problems that plague developing countries – access to decent healthcare, child poverty, social exclusion, education and housing, unemployment, domestic violence, and gender equality - have a very clear and growing manifestation in rich countries, including the UK.

Sometimes poverty in a rich country can be even more desperate than poverty in a poor country. For example in Botswana, a relatively poor country, after years of pressure from activists, pharmaceutical companies have agreed to provide generic drugs at greatly reduced prices. So an HIV sufferer without health insurance stands a good chance of accessing the drugs they need; whereas an HIV positive woman in the United States who has no private health insurance would need a charity to help her.

UK civil society has a critical role to play in bringing together marginalized groups to build global alliances around an agenda of empowerment. Many CSOs advocating equality abroad are divorced from the poorest communities in the UK, while the majority of British CSOs working on developing capacity in the South are still run by armies of middle-class expats. Simon Burall says: "I have the distinct sense that many of us are working in a self-referential bubble." Again the emergence of new, smaller and innovative organizations, such as several members of the British Overseas NGO Development Network (BOND) show much promise in rekindling some of the sense of unremunerated solidarity that characterized UK civil society, particularly from the 1960s till the late 1980s. The anti-apartheid movement in the UK for example, was largely driven by voluntarism, had a modest size secretariat and a modestly remunerated staff.

The consequences of consumerism

Making the connection between problems abroad and problems at home is not just a question of tackling apathy. UK civil society has a responsibility to demonstrate how the British public's voracious consumerism affects the rest of the world – from inadvertently supporting child labour by buying cheap clothes to contributing to deforestation by buying products made with palm oil. Taken in the global context, these lifestyle choices reflect warped priorities. In 1997, the UNDP estimated that the amount of money households in North America and Western Europe spend on pet food annually would be enough to provide three nutritional meals a day to every man, woman, and child in Africa for a year.

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Providing debt relief or humanitarian assistance to the South, without making any behavioural changes in the North, is a half-hearted and inadequate response to the quest for a sustainable planet governed by even a small sense of global justice. According to Kofi Annan's Global Humanitarian Forum it is now clear that the historical and contemporary consumption patterns of developed countries is responsible for the climate chaos that is already exacting 300 000 lives in the developing world annually from climate impacts, Civil society in the UK can thereby significantly contribute to global sustainability and justice by encouraging behavioural changes domestically – even without engaging beyond the UK.

The professionalisation of civil society

In the past, many Britons who struggled to achieve North/South solidarity, such as anti-apartheid activists or the volunteers who fought against Franco's fascist regime in the Spanish Civil War, were volunteers motivated by a passionate sense of injustice and a profound belief in global solidarity.

Benevolence, altruism and solidarity continue to be the driving principles of the bulk of UK NGOs, but these days there is a crucial difference: solidarity is remunerated begging the question if staff did not receive a salary would they still be as concerned and committed? NGOs need to be more honest in acknowledging the role of self-interest, because public trust in charities, justifiably significant as it, should never be taken for granted. We must recognise that chronic poverty and injustice in developing countries provides the raison d'être for such organisations to exist.

The professionalisation of the voluntary sector in the UK has become the norm globally. These days, the Headquarters of some CSOs look very similar to large corporations. Some claim that this is making organisations more efficient, effective and impactful. However, professionalisation often becomes bureaucratisation. Some organisations tend to be overly concerned with near-sighted considerations of organisational survival and sometimes get trapped, unwittingly, into short term thinking determined by the period of funding agreements and greater focus on service delivery and less of a priority on advocacy that will deliver the structural change that is needed both at home and abroad.

'Professionalism' too often means the quest for instant 'measurable' success or a quick return on investment - which ignores the fact that social development is as much a process as the delivery of services – it too often places organisational and/or 'brand' imperatives above the greater mission. The changing interplay between organisational structure, bureaucracy and activity under the guise of professionalisation can not be at the expense of voice and action. The fact that wide parts of civil society talk about their aims and objectives in the language of the corporate world (return on investment, brand imperatives etc) illustrates how connected the professionalisation agenda is to the measures and language of business and not social change.

4. Perspectives from civil society in the developing world

Reparations for past exploitation

In 1970, at the United Nations General Assembly, the world's wealthiest nations pledged to commit 0,7% of their GNP to address the development needs of the world's poorest countries. Although most countries have failed spectacularly to meet even this paltry target, this act is often portrayed to the electorates of rich countries as an act of charity. But in 1970, most countries in the developing world were emerging from decades of colonial bondage. To their citizens, aid was never understood as charity it was seen as compensation for some of the excesses and exploitation of colonialism.

The earliest NGOs operating in post-colonial environments tended to be faith-based organisations motivated by a paternalistic desire to improve the lot of poor communities and to assuage guilt for colonial misdeeds. Development aid usually consisted of material assistance – food, shelter, schools - but tended to come with a price: religious indoctrination and teaching locals to do things "our way".

Although southern NGOs now play a much more active role in the delivery of development and aid programmes, the North-South relationship is trapped in this clientelistic pattern of cultural imperialism. Externally funded CSOs may become too dependent on their donors, and lose contact with their constituencies. This has created what Ezra Mbogori, a prominent African civil society leader from Kenya, calls "a new dependency syndrome". Moreover, the governments of very poor countries offer preferential treatment to international NGOs as an incentive to invest in their country. This hinders the development of an autonomous, indigenous civil society, which is already disadvantaged by the complex procedures and conditionalities imposed by the international donor system.

Donor dependency

The failure of rich countries to meet their overseas aid commitments has bred suspicion in developing countries, which see these pledges as hollow promises to compensate for other protectionist policies that undercut the development potential of the South.

Aid in itself is a contentious issue in light of efforts by developing countries to move from a cycle of dependency to an agenda of empowerment. According to Steve Tibbett, former head of policy at War on Want and ActionAid's policy and campaigns director from 2004-6: "There should be less focus on increasing aid and more focus on how that aid is spent and on re-writing the rules. People in Africa are not asking for more aid, they want fairness, justice, rules that reflect the reality in which they live, rules that support poor countries and do not benefit rich countries, reforming the arms trade, improving their national governments." Tibbett argues that UK civil society is not responding to these demands, largely because it is reluctant to criticise foreign governments.

Rhetorically at least, governments are starting to address some of the systemic problems with aid policy. The 2008 Accra Agenda for Action called for a strengthening of national and international mutual accountability mechanisms. In March 2009, UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown told a conference on world poverty: 'We must ensure that aid flows are predictable and support plans formulated by national governments, not spent on priorities, however well intentioned, imposed by donors from afar.' The time has come to translate this rhetoric into action.

The current framework for aid can result in some perverse outcomes. Ironically, a great deal of aid is directed to developing countries to develop their human resources, while at the same time the brightest doctors, nurses, teachers and IT professionals in the South are being poached by developed countries. Activists from the South are often recruited by northern NGOs in a quest to promote inclusiveness, which leads to the unintended consequence of depriving Southern organisations of the leaders they so desperately need. For example, civil society activity in Malawi's health sector has led to a shortfall of nurses in public hospitals due to the higher wages offered by CSOs. There are more Malawian specialist doctors in Manchester than in Malawi, where there is only one doctor for every 50,000 people. This raises serious questions about who really benefits from these 'partnerships' and in fact who is aiding who?

The Problems of Partnership

'Partnership' is probably one of the most used and abused words in the development lexicon. Although the majority of UK-based NGOs seek genuine partnerships with civil society in the South, their primary role as resource-providers precludes this. Consequently, their so-called partners in the South tend to refer to NGOs in the north as 'funders', rather than 'partners'.

The potential for meaningful partnerships is undermined by an underlying sense of obligation to their donors in the North. When activists from developing countries visit developed countries, they are often paraded as partners and in some cases objectified. People, often grin and bear it because they are hoping to secure desperately needed resources for their work back home. Similarly, CSOs in the South will prioritise guests from the North – even if this strains their capacity - in the hope that there might be some resource benefit or advocacy potential.

Northern civil society should help Southern civil society reduce the transactional cost of servicing these relationships. One solution would be for all UK NGOs to agree a common format for funding applications and reporting. A standardised system would save considerable funds and time for southern organizations who spend an inordinate amount of time preparing funding proposals in a variety of formats and having to report in different formats as well.

The term 'capacity building' also irritates people in developing countries, because it is not as if people have no capacity - they just have different kinds of capacity. They may not know how to fill out a Logical Framework Approach matrix, but they have a range of other skills and competencies, which are often inhibited by a lack of opportunities. It is more important to release this capacity, rather than try to impose new constructs that do not necessarily match local needs and norms. Policies imposed from well meaning developed country groups can often alienate rather than serve the interests of communities in the South. For instance, local concerns such as poverty alleviation are, mistakenly seen sometimes as being at odds with international priorities like environmental protection. Global civil society needs to do more to demonstrate that these two critical issues – poverty eradication and tackling climate change – are not mutually exclusive.

Building leadership through local ownership

Global civil society often has a role in helping local CSOs on the ground, but this can have an ambiguous effect. For instance, the fact that many NGOs receive their funding from the developed world raises questions about the legitimacy of non-indigenous CSOs on the ground. Institutions must, first and foremost, be rooted in local society. Unless civil society has the trust of the people it serves, it is in danger of becoming, or perceived to be the agent of neo-imperialist outsiders. This perception is often manipulated by undemocratic regimes to undermine public support for externally funded NGOs that hold them to account.

In order to truly empower Southern civil society, donors and NGOs need to give greater ownership over agendas, resources, and budgets to local authorities, communities, and organisations. This process will strengthen leadership in Southern civil society, especially if it is supported by a rigorous process of self-evaluation. This will also help to build trust and convince sceptics in the North that the South is tackling problems of corruption and mismanagement.

In the existing international donor framework, competition for resources thwarts the potential for alliances among CSOs in developing countries. Territorialism among northern NGOs over the ownership of issues can be equally obstructive. For example, the Make Poverty History campaign, perhaps the most well known and most supportive unified campaign by the broadest spectrum of civil society in the UK was disbanded by UK development agencies reluctant to subordinate their individual brands to a more unified campaign. This has significantly strained the UK development community's relationship with their southern counterparts. To quote Ezra Mbogori: "British civil society is seemingly more preoccupied with its own survival than setting global agendas."

5. Conclusion: Challenging the status quo

Today, civil society has to make strategic choices about how much energy and resources it invests at the local, national, and global level, as well as in regional institutions like the European Union, the Mercosur, or the African Union. Each of these spheres of influence has an important role to play.

It is worth emphasizing that UK based civil society organisations can and should do more domestically without actually having to do any work outside the country. This could include, encouraging lifestyle change in relation to climate change; defending civil liberties, human rights legislation, freedoms of association, to try to set 'standards'; developing alliances and networks with like-minded organisations elsewhere to grow strength and voice in the corridors of power and to enable learning. Actively engaging with foreign policy and climate policy; actively scrutinizing the flow of and impact of capital (through the financial industry) as well as monitoring and opposing the voracious appetite of arms companies to supply to developing countries in zones of conflict, and supporting the action of workers in developing countries who are employed by UK companies when they are struggling for their labour rights far away from the UK itself. When South African dock workers refused to unload arms shipments on route to Zimbabwe British civil society and government applauded. However, secondary or solidarity action is illegal in the UK and so dock workers wanting to do similar things here in the UK would have to have thought long and hard about the ramifications of such action, particularly if the trades union is involved.

This is the spirit of solidarity that is needed and will ultimately provide more results, engage more citizens in the UK itself and I would argue, crucially, improve the democracy in the UK as more and more citizens lose faith in political leaders and political institutions.

Climate change: a catalyst for social change?

The threat of climate change could be the catalyst that breaks down the barriers between North and South and creates a new framework for solidarity and social change. Because if we fail to take action to avert catastrophic climate change, it won't matter whether we are from the North or South. Unless we act together, we will all suffer devastating consequences.

Time is rapidly running out before rising global temperature reaches an irreversible tipping point. Playing the blame game is a dangerous pretext for inaction. Instead of shirking responsibility, the North and South should accept shared responsibility. It is disingenuous to imagine that the citizens of developing countries, who are becoming increasingly industrialised, will not aspire to the western style consumption that has long been held up as the model of success. The West has to own up to its short-sightedness and actively enable new and better ways to lift the citizens of developed countries into greater comfort, without following the fossil-fuelled model of consumption that has got us to where we are now – the brink of disaster. This to some might sound alarmist. However, the reality for developing countries is that they are losing lives now from climate change related impacts, we now talk about climate refugees in parts of Africa and in a country like Bangladesh; and we can also see already that conflict is on the rise as a result of resource scarcity, particularly water and arable land, as a result of climate impacts. The sad reality is that those that have been least responsible for climate impacts are paying the first and most brutal price. At the same time, developing countries must kick-start the transition to low-carbon production models, and start to demonstrate real leadership on the global stage.

Reframing the aid agenda

It is not just climate change that has forced the international community to recognise that the architecture of global governance needs to be rebuilt, with its foundations firmly rooted in mutuality and solidarity. The shockwaves felt by the global financial crisis across every continent and every sector of society has demonstrated all too clearly that business as usual is not an option.

Citizens in rich and poor countries have woken up to that fact that they have much more in common than they thought. People have lost their jobs, homes, and pension funds at the hands of a banking sector driven by profit at all costs and run by self-appointed 'masters of the universe'. What we urgently need now is a system that allows all citizens to be in control of their own universe, governed by equitable institutions that are accountable to people.

In our globalised economy, it does not benefit the wealthy to allow poverty to grow. Creating fair constructs for more and better aid will, acting decisively on debt cancellation and most importantly ensuring a just and fair trading system is critically important and stands the best chance to ultimately create wealth for everyone, not just the poor. It will create local and global markets for products and services, self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship, demand and competition in the finance sector and fewer pressures in the long run on the wealthy countries already struggling with ageing populations and the consequent strains on social welfare systems.

In order to maintain the financial support of populations in the North for development work overseas, aid needs to be re-formulated - not as a handout, but as an investment in the future of humanity. The fundamental weaknesses in the aid system, such as conditionalities, disproportionately high transaction costs, the level of sovereignty that developing countries must give up to secure aid, and the amount of time required for bureaucracy and managing donor relationships, also need to be addressed.

Shifting the balance of power

The rise of the multi-polar world – driven by the emerging economic power of the BRIC countries - is accelerating changes in global power structures, but there is still a long way to go. Too often, policy interventions are formulated in an experiential vacuum, without direct input from those doing frontline activism and service delivery.

At the international level, the parties delegated as 'recipients' have an extremely limited say in how budgets are managed and policies are implemented. It may seem illogical to deny developing countries a role in determining their own development, but this is the reality. Coalitions of civil society groups are often the only channel for the voices of developing countries to be heard in multilateral negotiations.

In order to redress the imbalances in global power structures, northern civil society must do more to facilitate the participation of southern civil society in international fora. This will legitimise the efforts of northern CSOs working in developing countries. Above all, it will enable the South to hold Northern countries accountable for violations of their own rules, such as human rights abuses in Iraq and Afghanistan, the CIA's extraordinary rendition torture programme and the scar of the Guantanamo Bay detention centre.

With its extensive international networks and long history of overseas development work, UK civil society is well placed to convene networks to facilitate collaboration and public deliberation between the North and South. As well as engaging in advocacy at home (for example, putting pressure on the UK government to work for a fair, ambitious and legally binding climate treaty), British civil society can support southern CSOs' advocacy efforts in their own national spaces (for example, stepping up pressure on undemocratic regimes.) These processes are essential for reconciling differences in realities and aspirations in the North and South, in order to move towards global consensus.

British civil society must hold the UK government to account to ensure it does not continue to pursue international policies based on double standards. In doing so, CSOs must walk a fine line between pragmatic choices and radical proposals: taking advantage of the UK's dominance in the global governance system to lobby for reforms that will give a stronger voice to governments and civil society from the South; and at the same time, pushing for fundamental reforms of the global power structure, which will ultimately oblige Britain to surrender its seat on the UN Security Council.

To quote Simon Burall, Director of Involve: "UK CSOs must demonstrate what an equal world looks like… Our power as UK CSOs comes from the power of our own government in large part, and denying that power to southern states maintains the power imbalances. Sometimes the tactics for achieving this will be to work with the system, but our tactical moves should never strengthen the system."

Building solidarity within civil society

Just as no single country or region can solve global challenges single-handed, no single social movement, trade union, or NGO can deliver global justice alone. The sooner we recognise that, the more effective civil society will become as a global force to be reckoned with. We need to learn to work together better as a sector to reach shared goals, laying aside old rivalries and territories. Civic groups must focus on the many things that unite us, whilst respectfully disagreeing on the finer points of approach that keep us apart.

It is important that civil society organisations coordinate their activities so that their programmes, where possible, are not duplicative, contradictory, or incoherent, especially given that divisions on the part of civil society is likely to be exploited by state policy. This is an area where national, regional and global associations of CSOs such as CIVICUS (World Alliance for Citizen Participation), the Arab Network on Development, Bond (the UK body for NGOs working in international development), and Dóchas (the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations) have a vital role to play.

CSOs urgently need to improve connectivity in both campaigning and discourse between the various movements seeking to address interconnected issues like trade justice, debt cancellation, more and better aid. These different interest groups cooperate to some degree, but fail to coordinate at the levels that could exponentially improve performance. Existing funding mechanisms contribute to this compartmentalisation of issues.

As a result, anti-poverty activists are not maximising their resources and the major policy reforms required are failing to materialise. Instead, we have a painfully slow process of incremental changes that amount to a series of compromises. If we were to adopt a joined-up approach whereby human rights, human development and human security were finally appreciated as interdependent tenets, we might come up with new constructs that actually work.

The African proverb, "I am because you are", might have been formulated in a village context to underscore that human beings realise their full humanity through the relationships with others. Yet, in our increasingly globalising world, "I am because you are" is just as important and valid. Unless civil society can lead the way in breaking down the patterns of inequality between rich and poor countries, it is very unlikely that governments will be moved to act with the urgency that is needed to promote a genuinely interdependent world with much greater equality that is currently the case.

Moving towards mutual accountability

In order to move from a paternalistic welfare model to real global partnerships, we must do much more to promote mutual accountability and two-way learning. Knowledge transfer is not a one-way street. In the Netherlands we have seen reverse solidarity where Oxfam Novib has brought community leaders from developing countries to share their expertise with Dutch civil society groups working with marginalised and vulnerable communities in Holland.

People in richer countries with stronger democratic traditions can learn from those of us from poor countries or who have weaker democratic traditions, because twenty years ago our governments were challenging the legitimacy of civil society on the basis that we were not elected, even though they themselves were often not elected through free and fair elections. Therefore the oldest and best codes of ethical conduct for the NGO community tend to come from developing countries. For instance, SANGOCO, the South African NGO Coalition, adopted a code of ethical conduct in 1997, and in many developed countries similar initiatives were absent or often at least a decade behind such efforts by developing country CSOs.

Our global governance systems and global civil society and the relationships and interconnections within them are marked by inequalities and a profoundly unfair distribution of power. Civil society in the UK can significantly contribute to changing the nature of governance and interconnections. Civil society in the UK can help ensure that UK lifestyles, global governance structures, relationships and partnerships with southern civil society are all informed by notions of equality, solidarity, accountability and fairness. While there is much good practice to point to much can and should be done. Failure to rise to this challenge will likely lead to the international efforts of British civil society having an incremental positive impact at best instead of the transformative impact that the UK and the rest of the world sorely needs.

About the author

Kumi Naidoo is the Executive Director of Greenpeace International. An anti-apartheid activist from the age of 15, he has been involved in struggles to advance social, economic, political, gender and environmental justice. He was the founding executive director of the National Literacy Coalition in South Africa, the founding director of the South African NGO Coalition, the Secretary General of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation. His volunteer roles have included being the founding chair of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (www.whiteband.org), Chair of the Global Campaign for Climate Action (www.tcktcktck.org) and Chair of the Partnership for Transparency Fund (www. partnershipfortransparency.org). In 2003, the United Nations Secretary General appointed him to serve on the Eminent Persons Panel on UN-Civil Society Relationships.   He served five years on the Board of the Association for Women's Rights in Development. He has worked tirelessly to unite different parts of civil society and to build bridges across various divisions that impact on the effectiveness of civil society.

About the Carnegie UK Trust

The Carnegie UK Trust was established in 1913. Through its programmes, the Trust seeks to address some of the changing needs of the people in the UK and Ireland, in particular those of the less powerful in society. The Trust supports independent commissions of inquiry into areas of public concern, together with funding action and research programmes. There are currently two active programmes: the Democracy and Civil Society Programme and the Rural Programme.

The Democracy and Civil Society Programme has two elements to its work. The main focus of the programme is the Trust's Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland. The second focus of the programme is the Democracy Initiative, which aims to strengthen democracy and increase the ability of citizens and civil society organisations to collectively influence public decision-making.

The Rural Programme helps rural communities across the UK and Ireland to respond to and influence social, environmental and economic change. The programme works to ensure that rural priorities are fully recognised by decision-makers. This is done through: securing the practical demonstration of asset-based rural development; testing Carnegie UK Trust's Petal Model of Sustainable Rural Communities; and hosting a Community of Practice for rural activists and professionals.

Abstract

Humanity is grappling with a perfect storm of convergent crises - from the implosion of the global financial system to the escalating poverty pandemic, from the threats of terrorism, trafficking and organised crime to escalating concerns over energy security and climate change. Instead of driving greater global solidarity, these complex challenges are deepening social inequality and widening the chasm between the global North and South.

This paper by Kumi Naidoo examines why - despite all this citizen mobilisation - humanity is still failing to deliver solutions commensurate with the urgency and scale of the global challenges we face. It outlines the tensions and contradictions of power and privilege that exist between civil society in the North and South. Setting the role of UK civil society organisations in a global context, it aims to determine the responsibilities of UK civil society in supporting social movements in other countries with weaker democratic traditions and fewer resources at their disposal.

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