

International Civil Society Organizations: The Challenges of a Fractured Global Order

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International civil society organizations and a fractured global order

This note contains some general ideas on the new context and challenges for international civil society organizations (ICSOs). These reflections are derived from the arguments made in the note *A fractured global order: characteristics, structure and implications*, which is attached as an appendix to this note.

International civil society organizations face new challenges in the emerging fractured global order. First, there are new problems that require collective action at a scale without precedent (these are partly linked to the emergence of the domain of the global as a new realm for the exercise of human faculties, during the last few decades). Existing institutional arrangements in the public, private and civil society sectors are unable to cope with these new challenges.

Second, international civil society organizations share the scene with a growing number of transgovernmental, transcorporate and transassociational networks, whose fields of action and boundaries overlap. It has become increasingly difficult to establish and maintain a distinct identity and to define comparative advantage in this fluid setting. Collaboration and competition arrangements blur mandates and institutional borders, demanding new strategy and management styles.

Third, the approach to focus on a single issue, or narrowly defined group of issues, that served well the work of international civil society organizations in the past, may not be enough when challenges are increasingly interconnected, threats and opportunities in one field spill quickly into others, and disturbances spread and reverberate rapidly throughout the globe. At the same time, to remain viable, it is not possible for international civil society organizations to encompass many fields without losing identity and effectiveness. Incidentally, at the national level there exists a particular type of non-governmental non-private institution: political parties, which are supposed (and sometimes able) to identify, process, aggregate and state issues for citizens to decide and act upon. Nothing similar exists at the international or global level.

Fourth, the information and communications revolution has transformed the role of intermediary organizations at all levels, from local to global. Citizens can now

have direct voice, make themselves heard quickly and loudly, and need not rely on intermediary institutions to reach wide audiences. Yet, the avalanche of data, information and opinions available to all is creating confusion. It is making it increasingly difficult to develop sensible views on issues that require reliable evidence, reflection and considered judgment. One consequence has been a retreat into informational and ideological ghettos, where people refuse to listen to those that think differently. When raising issues and making proposals in their fields of action, international civil society organizations often have to wade through a quagmire of poorly articulated views, prejudices and demands, before reaching a place (or time) where (or when) to properly state their case.

There are other challenges for civil society organizations, such as the changing nature of financing, and the need to reflect while acting in order to learn and adapt quickly, but these are beyond the scope of this short note.

The new roles of international civil society organizations

Taking this into consideration, I would like to suggest some possible new roles that international civil society organizations could play in the emerging fractured global order. As indicated in the preceding paragraphs, some of the implications of the new international context for ICSOs are: the rise of global problems that require concerted action, the increasingly crowded international scene, the limitation of single-issue and single-perspective institutions, and the disintermediation resulting from advances in information and communications technologies.

An article by Moises Naim (The Washington Post, March 1, 2013) discusses the erosion of power, and what it means for a more diluted and fluid set of international power relations. His characterization of the “more”, “mobility” and “mentality” revolutions behind the erosion of power, and particularly the power of states, hints and possible new roles for ICSOs.

The growing and more complex interactions associated with the erosion of conventional power is putting a larger number of people and organizations —each with its own views, perspectives, objectives, and so on— in contact with each other. The section on international civil society of the 2013 *Human Development Report* of UNDP (United Nations Development Program, New York, 2013), makes some good points of what may be required of ICSOs in a more diverse world, in which countries of the South are more powerful and active players.

In this new context, there will be an increasing need for *honest brokers* that can help to create spaces for respectful dialogue and considered discussion that could lead to operative agreement, and even broad consensus, on key issues requiring concerted action at the regional, international or global levels.

Considering the limitations of international government and business organizations, the question is whether existing ICSOs can effectively play the role of honest brokers, or whether new institutional arrangements will be required.

If some ICSOs were to become honest brokers, it would be necessary to go beyond being intermediaries for the *delivery of services* (development, reconstruction, disaster and humanitarian relief), the *administration of development programs* (health, education, technology, agriculture, conservation, among others), and *being advocates* on key issues (human rights, environment, labor, and so on). These have been the traditional fields of action for most international civil society organizations.

What would this new role mean for ICSOs? It would require a more diverse and active engagement with a greater variety of institutions; a willingness to move from a largely single issue/single perspective approach to their work, towards more complex single-issue/multiple-perspective, multiple-issue/single-perspective and even multiple-issue/multiple-perspective approaches; and a disposition to mute, and perhaps temporarily suspend, the beliefs, objectives and even passions of ICSOs members, in order to consider and open up to divergent approaches and viewpoints.

Some remarks on the role of international think tanks

From the perspective of national and international development think tanks, with which I have been associated for nearly five decades, there are two major sets of changes that are disrupting our work.

First, the advantage these institutions had in the collection, processing and interpretation of information, and in the articulation, dissemination and advocacy of policy options, has been eroded. New purveyors of information, analysis and advice have challenged think tanks. These include mass media and the Internet, sources of instantaneous news and entertainment, like-minded online networks and superficial opinion polls, improvised experts and celebrity pundits. Amidst an avalanche of information and a cacophony of conflicting views grabbing the attention of policy and decision makers, think tanks face the challenge of helping identify reliable and balanced sources of information, creating spaces for reflection and analysis, and of articulating and communicating sound policy options.

Second, development assistance is now focused on “practical issues”, “showing results”, “achieving change on the ground”, and “generating direct impacts”. There is diminishing interest in supporting thought, reflection and the production of ideas to guide development interventions. This is worrisome and dangerous when a rapidly changing context demands new approaches and concepts to confront challenges without precedent. Think tanks and academic centers run the risk of being marginalized, precisely when they are most needed to avoid the “headless chicken syndrome” of furiously engaging in mindless action.