

## The Role of Civil Society in Global Governance

Report on the joint seminar organised by the EUISS, the European Commission / DG Research, and UNU-CRIS (Brussels, 1 October 2010)

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The seminar was structured in four sessions, one luncheon speech, and a concluding roundtable.

After an opening speech by J-M. Baer, **session 1** was devoted to "**Recent trends in global governance: The global impact of civil society, from local and national to transnational**". This session addressed a number of overall issues regarding the activity of civil society organization at the national and international level. Civil society participation on global governance institutions was discussed and its influence thereby unfolded, together with a specific examination of how the conceptualization of civil society is context-dependent (chair: L. van Langenhove; presenters: J.A. Scholte, M. Westlake, and D. Zhenglai).

**Session 2** was devoted to "**Case Study: climate change negotiations after Copenhagen. States, civil society and multilateral institutions: the need for a new 'equation'?**". In this session, a discussion was developed on the specific case of environmental activism. The recent mobilization for the Copenhagen meeting was analysed in order to detect its impact, but also its limits. The case of a transnational environmental network helped in understanding the internal dynamics of cross-border activism. Finally, the specific case of the ecological debt was taken into consideration as an instance of a dynamic of norm change in progress at the international level (chair: S. Oberthür; presenters: T. Burke, M. Duwe, and J. Martinez Alier).

The luncheon speech was on "**Civil Society and Security Politics: From Landmines to Global Zero Campaigns**". During this session, the specific domain of activist mobilization on security issues was analysed. The case served to highlight a number of key conditions for a successful transnational mobilization, but also to prove that civil society initiatives spread much beyond the traditional fields of development, human rights, or trade (moderator: J.P. Zanders; presenter: K. Krause).

Session 3 was devoted to "**Case Study: civil society and human rights protection in relation to global issues**". In this session, a specific attention was devoted on how human rights are promoted at the national, regional, and international level. Different strategies and modes of actions by activists have been analysed, together with the filters or obstacles that international, regional, and

national authorities implicitly or explicitly erect (chair: V. Arnault; presenters: W. Benedek, T. Kumar Bose, C. Ruzza).

Session 4 was devoted to “**Civil society’s legitimacy & accountability revisited: new frontiers of NGOs, QUANGOs and non-state actors’ networks**”. This session examined how civil society organizations interact with international and national institutions by impacting on their accountability. While their role within this domain may positively contribute to the legitimacy of such public bodies, the session also warned about the dangers of cooptation and instrumentalization civil society organization may be subject to (chair: J-M. Baer; presenters: M.Pianta, W.W. Burke-White, B. Arora).

Finally, the concluding roundtable was devoted to discussing “**Transnational civil society: lessons learned and prospects in a multipolar world.**” In this last session, the policy contribution of civil society organization was specifically addressed. By looking at regional and global interaction between civil society organizations and public institutions, the discussion highlighted both the ability of civil society to positively contributing in the formulation of policy prescriptions and implementation, and the limits of their action due to geo-political and power politics reasons (chair: A. de Vasconcelos; presenters: F.Ikome, A.F. Cooper , N. Harrington; discussant: R. Marchetti).

### **The conditions for the presence of civil society in the global system**

It is now widely recognised that global or transnational civil society plays a significant role in global governance. In the last 30 years, and especially after the end of the Cold War, the presence of civil society organisations (CSOs) in international affairs has become increasingly relevant. They have played a role in agenda setting, international law-making and governance, transnational diplomacy (tracks II and III), and the implementation and monitoring of a number of crucial global issues ranging from trade to development and poverty reduction, from democratic governance to human rights, from peace to the environment, and from security to the information society. CSOs have thus been significant international actors as advocates for policy solutions, service providers, knowledge brokers, or simply watchdogs and monitors of state and intergovernmental actions.

This global activism has taken place within a particular political constellation produced by the combination of institutional backing, socio-economic processes, technological innovation, and the dominance of a specific political ideology among other elements.

A number of international organisations have supported the inclusion of civil society actors within international decision-making. The UN has actively promoted cooperation with civil society in global governance, especially in relation to the world summits which have provided a forum for global civil encounters to occur. The European Union has followed a similar approach by integrating different types of civil society organisations within its governance mechanisms.

The globalisation process has generated a sense of common purpose among civil society actors, and has thus been a trigger for both internal unification, increasing the sense of solidarity among civil society organisations, and for contestation of the socio-economic consequences of globalisation. The rapid intensification of neo-liberal socio-economic policies has provoked a strong political response from very different sectors of civil society. For the first time, a number of *ad hoc* coalitions and campaigns have been organised on a trans-ideological basis, going beyond the traditional political barriers of previous forms of mobilisation, and targeting a number of controversial (mainly economic) aspects of globalisation.

The technological innovations in the IT field have revolutionised the organisational patterns within civil society. Through the internet, groups from different parts of the world have been able to

familiarise themselves with other political realities, like-minded organisations, and alternative forms of action. In this way, they have been able to increase their political know-how and their ability to coalesce trans-nationally on common targets.

Finally, the wider international system, based as it is primarily on liberal western principles, has offered a conducive environment for these kinds of activities to develop. The widespread recognition of the transnational value of human rights, civic participation, accountability, social empowerment, and gender equality have enhanced the possibilities for civil society organisations to gain space and legitimacy in the international system beyond the traditional framework of state-based representation.

In sum, the recent increased presence of civil society in international affairs can be interpreted within the broader liberal paradigm as mainly characterised by two different roles played by civil society. First, civil society organisations have played a key role in democracy promotion through the affirmation of human rights. In line with the liberal assumption according to which a truly democratic system can only come about through the involvement of an effective and lively public opinion, which provides input into the political system and keeps it under the pressure of accountability, civil society actors have provided an increasingly recognised bottom-up contribution to the legitimacy of the international system. Second, civil society organisations have also played a role in service delivery. In the last few decades states have played a diminishing role as service providers both domestically and internationally, leading to the ‘privatisation’ of world politics. Within this context, seemingly ‘technical’ and ‘apolitical’ civil society organisations have flourished both locally and trans-nationally.

The specific political constellation that has facilitated the growth and consolidation of civil activism at the international level may help in understanding not only the origins of this phenomenon, but also in deciphering the contours of any future development of global civil society’s role. If the support of international institutions diminishes, if the globalisation process becomes constrained by nationalistic policies, if technological innovations remain compartmentalised, and finally if the international system turns towards rigid state-centrism and evolves into a *realpolitik*-dominated multipolar system (thereby including forms of regionalisation), then the conditions for the transnational flourishing of civil society may fade away, and activists may find themselves under pressure to find alternative forms of political action that are more suitable to this new scenario.

### **Challenges and opportunities for civil society in global governance**

Both the service-delivery and democracy-enhancing functions of civil society at the international level are politically significant. However in what follows the focus is on the latter, since it arguably prefigures political innovation of greater significance.

In the age of global transformation, traditional intergovernmental institutions have struggled to provide effective and legitimate responses to global issues such as: climate change, financial instability, disease epidemics, intercultural violence, arbitrary inequalities, etc. As a response to these shortcomings, forms of multi-level, stakeholder governance have been recently established, in which a combination of public and private actors is present. While this has increased the effectiveness of such civil society actors, their degree of legitimacy is still questioned.

Civil society action at the international level is predominantly focused on building a new conceptual and political framework within which the democratic accountability of decision-making processes, within global governance arrangements, can be legitimately demanded. This is ultimately due to the simple fact that accountability can only exist after a framework for it has been built.

At present most global governance bodies arguably suffer from accountability deficits. These agencies lack the traditional formal mechanisms of democratic accountability that are found in nation-states, such as popularly elected leaders, parliamentary oversight, and non-partisan courts. Instead, the executive councils of global regulatory bodies are mainly composed of bureaucrats who are far removed from the situations that are directly affected by the decisions they take. People in peripheral geographical areas and in marginalised social circles are especially deprived of recognition, voice and influence in most contexts of global governance as it is currently practised. An apt depiction of such an international system is to describe it as one centred on the idea of 'transnational exclusion'.

One possible response to this exclusionary situation characterised by poor forms of accountability is to promote civil society engagement in global governance. Indeed, in recent decades most global regulatory bodies have begun to develop noteworthy relations with civil society organisations (see, for instance, the European Economic and Social Committee of the EU or, more recently, the newly established Committee on World Food Security within the Food and Agriculture Organisation). While the role of civil society organisations in these contexts remains predominantly based on a consultative status, they still allow for the exercise of various forms of 'soft power' by CSOs. The emerging context of global governance has thus provided a number of new opportunities for civil society. Given that they need to balance their deeper impact on societies with greater legitimacy, global governance institutions have been under pressure to be more inclusive and attentive to the political claims coming from below. Thanks to such dynamics, civil society actors have managed to have increased access to international agenda-setting, decision-making, monitoring, and implementation of global issues.

At the same time, the challenge to the inclusion of civil society actors in global governance mechanisms is never ending. New institutional forms are continuously emerging and the challenge in terms of integration is accordingly constantly being renewed. New institutional filters are created and civil society actors need to constantly re-focus and adapt to new circumstances. An example is provided by the recent shift from the G8 to the G20 format. Here it can be noted that civil society activists are lagging behind. While activism around the G8 was intense, the more recent meetings of the G20 have so far attracted less attention from civil society actors.

### **Main features of transnational activism**

In the last two decades, civil society has been an increasingly active player in global issues. Its role -long confined to a national dimension- has expanded through growing cross-border activism, the rise of permanent transnational networks and global epistemic-like communities, leading to major campaigns that have often influenced the outcomes of decision-making on global issues.

Within global activism, transnational networks are crucial political actors. Transnational networks play a major role in terms of the aggregation of social forces and the development of common identities. While embedded in global social movements, they provide political innovation in terms of conceptualisation, organisational forms, communication, political skills, and concrete projects to the broad archipelago of activism.

In the last two decades, cross-border networks of civil society organisations have been the most typical actor promoting political and economic change on global issues. Typical examples of transnational networks active on global justice issues include Our World Is Not for Sale (OWINFS), which has a global reach on trade issues; Via Campesina, with a global, South-based perspective on agricultural issues; Attac, a global network of national associations addressing finance and

economic policy; Jubilee 2000 and Jubilee South constituting global networks on debt issues; the various women's networks active on human rights issues. People's Global Action (PGA), an informal network of grassroots activists, but also the International Committee that organises the World Social Forum (WSF) can be considered as a global network engaged in making the largest gathering of global social movements possible every year. Similar transnational networks have emerged in the fields of human rights (such as the campaign to create the International Criminal Court), human security and disarmament (from landmines to small arms), environmental issues, and many other global themes.

Transnational networks are usually characterised by their advocacy of the promotion of normative change in politics, which they pursue through the use of transnational campaigns. Many of these campaigns have had some success in influencing policy on global issues. Major examples are the efforts for the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) (1995), which led to the approval of the Rome statute (1998); the Jubilee campaign on Third World debt (1996), which induced creditor governments and the International Monetary Fund to take some steps toward debt relief for highly indebted poor countries; the international campaigns to ban landmines (1992), which led to the intergovernmental conference in Ottawa where the Mine Ban Treaty was signed (1997). Beyond campaigns, however, transnational networks may also carry out alternative practices – such as solidarity actions or fair trade – that are largely separated from the spheres of global politics and the global economy.

While ultimately converging on almost universal values, the normative aspect of transnational civil society organisations, and especially networks, is crucial in defining their identity. In particular, the normative component of these kinds of organisations illustrates a dual and reciprocal dynamics, in which universal principles encounter values and norms generated from below, resulting in an unpredictable and creative normative combination. Transnational networks foster a number of fundamental principles which, despite having originated in a specific cultural context, can be shared by culturally diverse actors. These principles typically include equality, justice, peace, human rights, autonomy, and environmental protection. Alongside these fundamental principles, value pluralism is expressed by the differing norms emerging from below, from grassroots movements, which serve as sources of credibility for the project of normative persuasion advanced by transnational networks.

At the core of the dynamics leading to the emergence and operation of transnational activism resides the perception of the possibility of change in one specific global issue area. This possibility might be due either to the 'discovery' of a new issue as significant, or to the re-interpretation of a long-standing issue in a different way. Ultimately a key component of transnational activism in global governance lies exactly in its stubborn attempt to influence the normative battle on the right and legitimate interpretation of key global issues. In this perspective, CSOs should be seen not only as traditionally problem solvers (providing solutions which governments are less suited to delivering), but also as 'problem generators' (imposing new problematic issues on the international agenda). While the perception of an unjust situation necessarily constitutes a precondition for action, it is only when the actor recognises the possibility of having a positive impact on such a situation that mobilisation may start. Two elements are necessary for such mobilisation: conceptualisation and political commitment.

Transnational mobilisation on global issues should be interpreted as the result of several steps. A crucial challenge for any transnational network is the ability to present the issue at stake in such a way that it is perceived as problematic, urgent, and yet soluble. The first step in cross-border mobilisations is therefore the production of knowledge and the creation of frames through which the issue at stake can be correctly interpreted.

A second step consists in the external dissemination and strategic use of such knowledge. This is the crucial stage for it is here that information acquires a fully public dimension, thus a political significance. Global public opinion needs to be attracted and its imagination captured for framing the terms of the conflict in such a way that the issue at stake becomes associated to a general interest which requires a public engagement. Often, when networks become active players in the 'epistemic communities' of experts on global issues, they tend to be perceived by public opinion as credible sources of information and this increases their influence on policy-making.

However, in order to promote change a third step is necessary in terms of the acquisition of legitimate representation of the general interests at stake. Contrasting the situation of international affairs in which states monopolise power and social actors are structurally excluded, the task consists here in the appropriation of a recognised role in the public sphere, as rightful advocates of general interests.

### **Political circumstances facilitating transnational civil mobilisation**

The global political opportunity structure within which transnational activism operates is complex and multilayered. While the issues that motivate the mobilisation can be ultimately global (though very often mediated by national or local dimensions), the successful outcome of mobilisations is rooted in the structure of political opportunities combining the national and transnational domains of political action. While success necessarily depends on international circumstances, an important role in the rise of global social movements is often played by national conditions.

In national contexts, civil society organisations are rooted in a thick web of social relations and common identities, have access to important resources (human, financial, etc.), but operate in highly formalised political systems that shape and constrain their mobilisation and impact through a number of political filters. While democratic countries tend to leave more space for activism, in countries ruled by other kinds of regimes activists' room for manoeuvre may be severely limited, consequently affecting their ability to take an active part in global or transnational mobilisations.

Conversely, at the global transnational level the lack of a rigid, well-defined institutional setting similar to the national one and the failure to address global problems, widens the options for political action. In different ways, international organisations such as the United Nations or the European Union may provide opportunities for creating political spaces and mobilising resources to the advantage of transnational networks and national activism. This notwithstanding a number of major obstacles and costs that activists face in building up cross-border relationships among organisations with different cultures and languages, and with limited resources.

In fact, transnational networks may contribute to expand the political opportunities that are present in national contexts; they often serve as facilitators for providing space to actors who are usually voiceless and excluded. Transnational networks can also amplify local voices through global 'bridges' and 'boomerangs', setting them in the context of global issues and policies, and providing in this way greater strength to local or national activism. At the global level, transnational networks can provide 'discursive representation' to global interests that remain unrepresented in the political system.

In the more fluid space of global politics, the wider opportunities for political action may lead to transnational networks deploying a variety of strategies. When there is a low degree of conflict and institutional alliances are possible, 'vertical, cross-cutting coalitions' on selected global issues may emerge. In these, civil society organisations may co-operate, or at least establish a dialogue, with particular supranational organisations and with some 'progressive' governments or regional bodies (as in the cases of the International Criminal Court, landmines, child labour, or the Cancun WTO

conference). When conflict is strong, on the other hand, it can be easily directed to the highest level, to the core of global decision-making (as in the case of G8 protests), with a highly visible and effective challenge. In both cases, the results are greater opportunities for transnational networks to emerge as a legitimate and authoritative voice for global interests, extending their impact on public opinion and on civil society organisations interested in joining transnational networks and mobilisations.

### **The global unevenness of civil society**

The past few decades has witnessed, as argued above, a robust development of civil societies across the whole globe, not only at the local and national levels, but also at the transnational level. This process, nevertheless, is far from homogenous, as civil society's development is inescapably intertwined such local factors as the socio-economic *status quo*, history, tradition and ideology. For this very reason, the development of civil societies across the globe is not only uneven, but also multifaceted and diverse, in that the *modus operandi* of civil society's development may not be easily replicable across national, regional or cultural boundaries.

The spread of civil society and its active participation in global or transnational forms of mobilisation is thus still uneven. In the last few decades, most transnational activism has come from western organisations, with significant exceptions in Latin America and South-East Asia. If we look at a map of transnational activism, we may easily note that the western civil society organisations are intensely and transnationally linked among each other, with significant linkages to organisations in Latin America and a few countries in South-East Asia. Other parts of the world, however, are still socially disconnected. Russia, China, most of Africa, and the Arab world constitute islands which remain relatively isolated from the overall trend of growth of transnational civil society. While this also accounts for the quality and quantity of the results yielded by transnational activism (e.g., not all constituencies have been affected in the same way), this uneven participation damages the credibility of such activism as a genuinely global movement that is able to champion in an inclusive way the real needs of all communities in the world.

The validity of the very concept of civil society is also contested. Some argue that the concept of civil society as a sphere distinct from the family, state, and market remains a western concept that does not apply easily to a non-western context where the boundaries of these spheres are more blurred. Moreover, the high degree of value pluralism and political visions in the civil domain, and particularly the tension between universalistic approaches and grassroots mobilisation, is sometimes taken as an almost insurmountable barrier to genuine global mobilisation. Following on from this recognition, some even argue that when we discuss civil society in a transnational context we may be referring substantially to different phenomena. While on the surface we may use the same term, 'civil society', socially and politically speaking we might ultimately be referring to very different entities depending on the respective national and cultural contexts. Also, when a single reading of civil society and a single, universalistic approach prevails, then this cannot but be, according to some, the product of an hegemonic (mainly western) position within the world of civil society. When this relativistic and critical stance is adopted, a suggestion is usually advanced in terms of a tolerant attitude of listening, as the most favorable way of facilitating cultural and political encounters on a genuinely egalitarian basis.

### **Legitimacy in-between autonomy and cooptation**

A major issue in transnational activism is constituted by the long-standing dispute on the legitimacy of civil actors. While it is clear that civil society organisations cannot aim at substituting the traditional channels of political representation, it is also recognised that they often play a key role in 'broadcasting' needs and aspirations that struggle to be included in the political agenda.

From the activist perspective the issue of political representation should not be interpreted as an answer to the question of who they represent, but rather what they aim to represent. The issues they tackle and the values they seek to uphold are crucial from their perspective, possibly more than their 'constituencies'. Civil society organisations usually claim to advance the public interest. While it is evidently not clear what the public interest is with regard to many specific global issues, the ambition of civil society is, as argued above, to contribute, within the normative battlefield of global public opinion, to the right interpretation of what constitutes the public interest.

The contribution of civil society actors in terms of legitimacy enhancement at the international level is increasingly recognised. Following a broad liberal paradigm, international organisations, national states, and the wider society tend to assume that an increased participation of civil society and stakeholder actors at large in global governance helps to increase its legitimation. This result is *de facto* better achieved when the autonomy of civil society is preserved and an effective channel for communicating the grassroots political claims is established through these actors. Here a distinction should be made between two types of civil society organizations that have a very different attitude towards political institutions. On the one hand, there are the international, professional, NGOs that tend to favour institution-related activities such as lobbying or public advocacy. These CSOs aim to improve the legitimacy of the global governance organizations through a reformist approach. On the other there are the more locally rooted CSOs or social movement organizations that might coalesce through transnational networks and tend to prefer more direct forms of action and contestation. These CSOs aim to radically contest and change the nature and form of the international institutional system through an oppositional and contentious approach. For these reasons, these two kinds of civil society organizations are not always mobilizing together.

Two negative sides of international activism should, however, be noted: cooptation and 'ostracization', as examples respectively of full inclusion/integration into or full exclusion from the political system. On the one hand, the risk of cooptation by the institutional system is always high for civil society organisations. They need financial resources, public recognition, and political support, all of which are usually provided or facilitated by the political system. At the same time, the political system may take advantage of the fragmentation and proliferation of CSOs by picking and choosing on the basis of political convenience those groups who are most inclined to cooperate by adopting the current political agenda. In this way, CSOs may be instrumentally led to provide an integration for top-down representation of specific interests or for service delivery of specific goods. The frequently discussed case of government-owned NGOs (GONGOs) illustrates here the extreme situation of full cooptation and integration into the political system. On the other hand, the issue of violence and resistance at large to the overall political system remains a controversial point, which heavily depends on the political interpretations of such attitudes. From radical antagonism to radical nationalism (not to mention criminal groups), the oppositional attitude to institutional politics has often been criminalised and marginalised from the political system through securitization policies.

### **The impact of civil society in terms of the democratic accountability of global governance**

Ultimately the role of civil society in global governance has to be assessed, as for any other political actor, with reference to its impact. More specifically in relation to the focus of this report, the dimension of this impact under scrutiny is the ability to promote the democratic accountability of global governance institutions.

Over recent decades civil society activities have, arguably, generated a number of important contributions in terms of increase in the accountability in global governance. While this is still far from being a decisive move towards a comprehensive democratization of world politics, these incremental steps should not be underestimated.



At least two kinds of impact can be identified. On the one hand, CSOs have managed to influence political decision-makers by giving voice to the voiceless and framing new issues. On the other, CSOs have also managed to pressurise global governance institutions so that today the overall level of transparency, consultation, outside evaluation, efficiency, and probity is definitely higher than it was two decades ago. Such results cannot be attributed solely to civil society, but they have been achieved undoubtedly in part thanks to civil mobilisations. Accordingly, CSOs have had a significant impact on world public opinion (e.g. the Iraq war) and the framing of global issues (e.g. the Tobin tax, the financial crisis), and an influence on deliberative processes (e.g. climate change) and innovative policy actions/tools (e.g. AIDS, women). At times, they have managed to have an impact through governmental action (e.g. the ICC, landmines, cluster bombs), and more rarely they have impacted directly on the global business community (e.g. blood diamonds, corruption). This said, we need to acknowledge that in absolute terms the impact has been modest and uneven. As much as CSOs are unevenly concentrated in the global north (although a degree of rebalancing has been noticeable in recent years), they have also achieved political results that mirror this geopolitical imbalance. The gains achieved by political activism have been mostly in line with the agendas framed in the north and to the benefit of the northern constituencies.

Why is civil society more effective on some issues than on other? Recent studies have shown that greater effectiveness in transnational civil society action is achieved when the following conditions are met:

- the creation of transnational coalitions and networks on specific global issues, with the participation of CSOs from different domains of action, as well as the scientific community and the business world;
- the simultaneous use of various forms of actions ( public awareness campaigns, protest, lobbying, alternative policies and practices);
- the deployment of a multilayered strategy (i.e., local, national, regional, and global) which parallels the multilevel structure of global governance;
- the creation of ‘vertical alliances’ with UN agencies, like-minded governments, and business actors;
- the presence of leadership with charisma, passion, acumen, determination and reflexivity;
- the availability of resources in terms of funds, staff, information etc.;
- the absence (or limited presence) of explicit or implicit institutional obstacles and filters.

### **Case study I: Civil Society and the MDGs**

In the negotiations on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) the recognition and role of civil society has increased over the years both in terms of global public policy formulation and of service delivery at the country level. The new transnational and horizontal organisational forms of civil society actors have challenged the traditional dominance of vertical, intergovernmental politics. This has been possible because a process took place within which states slowly accepted the presence of civil society organisations within the MDG negotiations, a sign that progress was being made towards ‘inclusive multilateralism’ as forms of intergovernmental decision-making processes that include also non-governmental actors. While in the Millennium Declaration their acceptance was tentative and based on their capacity to realize the UN’s goals and programmes, today their presence is taken as a given not only in terms of their service delivery function but also as a full

political actor whose partnership is deemed crucial. Such a change in attitude towards civil society has been due to the widespread acknowledgment that multi-stakeholder consultation and participation is key for effective and accountable progress in development through the MDGs. For instance, former UNSG Kofi Annan in the late 1990s called for new ‘coalitions for change’, constituted by both civil society and private actors and centred on the focal point of the UN.

Despite this, limitations and challenges remain. Just to list a few: civil society participation is still seen as a specific, distinct domain by many UN officials. The increased voice acquired by civil society has not automatically translated into greater accountability. The growth in number of recognised civil society actors within the UN has not necessarily strengthened their capacity to have an impact. The unevenness of the civil society field is problematic, as characterised by the fact that well-resourced international NGOs have at times unintentionally marginalised or silenced local voices. The internal accountability of civil society organisations still remains a disputed issue. Finally, the link between the global level and the country-specific conditions is still too weak and characterised by a top-down approach.

### **Case study II: Civil Society from Landmines to Global Zero**

The domain of security challenges has been for some time underestimated as an arena in which civil society can have an influence, in comparison with other fields such as environmental challenges or human rights. And yet there have been impressive successes by civil society actors in the field of security too. While action on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), biological weapons, the Geneva Declaration on armed violence and development, and perhaps the ‘global zero’ anti-nuclear campaign have had a limited influence on global politics, other campaigns such as the campaign to ban anti-personnel landmines, the cluster munitions campaign, and the current work on the Arms Trade Treaty prove that civil society action is indeed able to have a significant impact in this domain too. In such cases, civil society, or rather more specifically NGOs, have been able to exert an effective influence on policy making at the international level.

In this field, a few factors can be identified as facilitating effective engagement from civil society actors. First, policy uncertainty provides an opportunity for civil society to influence the identification of the scope of the problem and the most promising initiatives. More in general, it gives civil society a chance to frame the issue in a different, innovative way, if not to ‘generate’ the issue itself by linking it to well-established principles. Second, financial resources are crucial in order to produce effective mobilisation. But these resources are usually provided by a small handful of states. Hence, the third factor – effective partnership with political entrepreneurs – remains crucial, which almost by default excludes the possibility of oppositional or radical campaigns. Fourth, the convergence of a number of activist groups on a single, easy-to-communicate goal remains important, though this might mean that complex, regionally diversified, long-term, and important issues will hardly emerge as a focal point in global public opinion. Fifth, the ability to create cross-cutting coalitions with members active in different fields of action.

### **Case study III: Civil Society and the Ecological Debt**

The environmental field provides another example of civil society success in influencing the agenda and decision-making at the international level. This has been done firstly by generating new ideas, by interpreting reality in a different way, and by highlighting issues which were previously overlooked. The issue of the ecological debt provides a good example of this kind of political dynamics activated by a civil mobilisation in partnership with the scientific community.

As a response to the ‘accumulation by dispossession’, environmental justice organisations (EJOs) have been campaigning for the acknowledgement of the ecological debt since at least 1991. At the

2009 Copenhagen conference of the parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the new world Climate Justice network was very visible in the Klima Forum and equally visible were new crosscutting alliances; notably 'Via Campesina' platform on climate change, arguing that "sustainable peasant agriculture cools down the Earth. While we are still far from full acceptance of such a principle, in Copenhagen at least twenty Heads of State or ministers (mainly from southern countries) made explicit reference to such a concept. Some even went as far as to claim the right to receive ecological reparations via compensations. The controversy lies today in the discrepancy between admitting a role in polluting the atmosphere and being assigned with responsibility or even culpability for such an action. Common but differentiated responsibility is an increasingly recognised principle in this regard. It has been calculated that the climate debt owed by Northern to Southern countries amounts to USD 75 billion per year, while the accumulated ecological debt from North to South would be over USD 2 trillion. It is evident that any recognition of historical liability would have significant consequences.

Beyond the specific case of the ecological debt, the overall topic of the environment has turned out to be a crucial issue at a high level in the international agenda. Some of the reasons for this increasing impact are related to the nature of environmental issues. On the one hand environmental issues are closely related to energy provision and industrial development, thus closely connected with the core of economic development, and on the other hand the environment is a phenomenon that impacts on the population at large, thus affecting indiscriminately both rich and poor, northern and southern citizens. EJOs have successfully managed to place the environmental issue high on the political agenda.

#### **Case study IV: Civil Society and Human Rights**

The domain of human right promotion has traditionally been a key field of action for civil society organizations. It has provided not only a specific field of direct action in the implementation of humanitarian policies, but it has also offered an overarching normative framework for most of the CSOs active at the international and national level. The term civil itself has often been interpreted with reference precisely to the defence of human rights. Human rights activists have played a significant role in both "human rights delivery" on the ground and human right advocacy at the institutional and public opinion level. Though independent action and through projects commissioned by national and international organizations, CSOs have managed to secure an effective implementation of human rights policies (from civil and political rights to socio-economic and cultural rights) in many part of the world. At the same time, CSOs have been key actors in the agenda setting of both international and national institution through the spread of the human rights discourse. A more nuanced reading is however needed when assessing the human rights discourse in world politics. It can also be observed that the space for civil society organisations working on human rights is shrinking in some contexts with restrictive laws being issued or various forms of 'silencing' being practiced.

The human rights discourse slowly spread all around the world in parallel to the increasingly recognition of the United Nation system and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As such it is a discourse that historically derives from the west and that has generated at times a critical stance in some sectors of civil society organizations worldwide. Its universalising character has accordingly been criticised for being insufficiently conscious of cultural differences and for contributing to a modernizing/westernising agenda. More, the human rights discourse has been at time interpreted not so much as a genuine political stance, but rather as a mere instrument of propaganda for supporting differing political objectives and as such has been fiercely opposed. The domain of Peacebuilding offers a clear case of such normative controversy that is fuelled also by some CSOs. In civil conflict the adoption of the human rights discourse is increasingly frequent, in that it contributes to legitimize the political party that holds it. The trend is such that it is not

uncommon to find the apparently paradoxical situation in which two opposing civil organizations deploy the same kind of human rights rhetoric for upholding two conflicting political objectives. Especially ethno-political conflicts, the instrumental use of the human rights discourse is considered an important political resource that may have a wide variety of consequences, including up to the conflict securitization. It is in cases such as these that the politicized nature of human rights emerges with clarity, together with the crucial role of CSOs as actors that decisively contribute to the normative battle for the specific, context-related interpretation of the overall ideal of human rights.

## **Recommendations**

Below are a number of recommendations for global governance institutions on how to strengthen civil society participation (symmetrical recommendations could be formulated for CSOs alike).

### Reforms at the individual level:

- promote charismatic leadership by global governance officials both via people who are driven by passion and long-term commitment and via creative tacticians who can plot ways through the many institutional and deeper structural hindrances to achieve democratic accountability
- bolster a self-critical reflexivity that keeps global governance officials alert to including groups and perspectives that otherwise tend to be marginalised

### Reforms at the institutional level:

- envisage permanent, easier, and more inclusive structures and mechanisms for civil society participation in institutional decision-making
- counter the tendency of seeing civil society interaction with global governance institutions as a peripheral 'extracurricular' activity
- allocate more funds for relations with CSOs
- develop larger and better-maintained databases of relevant CSOs
- increase the number, quality and seniority of specialist staff for CSO liaison
- give officials greater guidance and training on relations with CSOs
- offer staff clearer and more substantial incentives to engage with civil society
- provide a stronger lead from management to promote relations with CSOs
- cultivate positive institutional attitudes towards civil society
- encourage the participation of small and local CSOs
- differentiate CSOs from other kind of organisations such as business lobbies or consultants.

