



International Organisations and Civil Society by Margaret G. Wachenfeld, Consultant

Nothing is taken for granted anymore...

International organisations are being challenged intellectually, democratically and politically by civil society organisations (CSOs) who question conventional thinking about international economic rules and architecture. They are highlighting the «democratic deficit» in global governance institutions and a sharp decline in trust in public institutions. There is a shift from street protests to a more nuanced and informed challenge from a range of CSOs based on more sophisticated research and arguments. CSOs continue to use the channels for interaction offered by international organisations, but also create their own forums, such as the World Social Forums.

You can't just ignore it...

Each one may be carefully feeling its way, but international organisations are no longer asking themselves «why should we engage?» but rather «how do we go about organising dialogue with CSOs?» The trend is for international organisations to have more of, and better, engagement with civil society: more formalised channels of communications are replacing ad hoc meetings with civil society; the staff handling these relations is more professional; institutions are now taking multifaceted, often creative approaches to consultations which have become more open and inclusive. They are providing multiple sources of information and making efforts to explain their decision-making process and why comments received were or were not reflected, rather than just announcing a final decision. At the same time, they are becoming more proactive in seeking out those representatives of civil society who can make a real contribution.

Do's and Don'ts for Consultations...

Consultations are a technique, not an end in themselves, and should be treated as a way-point in building longer-term relations with civil society. Dialogues should be ongoing and permanent and focus on building trust while at the same time, being effective. The governing principles for dialogue must be the same for all parties to the dialogue: openness, good faith dialogue, and responsiveness (explanations for decisions taken and not taken). Consultations are most successful when international organisations acknowledge the diversity of CSOs, respect the CSOs own way of working, enter into the dialogue with an open mind, and allocate the resources necessary for interacting with CSOs. After all, many CSOs are working very hard to understand the way that markets - and the institutions that govern them -- function.

Other roles for civil society

CSOs can also play an active role in implementing and monitoring instruments of international organisations such as the OECD Guidelines on Multinational Enterprises and the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention. They and the public at large are increasingly interested in process at international organisations. Improving transparency and accountability are major challenges not only for companies, increasingly required to report on their activities, but also for international organisations funded by taxpayers.

Challenges remain for both sides

International organisations are under pressure to include CSOs into decision-making rather than just using outputs from separate civil society consultations as inputs into a closed decision-making process. After relying on personal relationships, the next step is to build trust at an institutional level. Once institutions have gained confidence in their ability to interact effectively with civil society, they can become more proactive, reaching out to the most representative interlocutors. To do so, international organisations must be willing to commit the necessary resources and staff must be given the appropriate incentives to work with civil society.

CSOs themselves are under pressure to demonstrate their own accountability even though transparency and disclosure can be heavy burdens for sparsely funded or small CSOs. They must achieve credibility, understanding the «do as I do, not just do as I say» lesson for their own business model. They face increasingly heavy competition for funding, and as a result some of the bigger CSOs are even starting to focus on brand management. Preserving their independence can be a challenge where government or international institutions are the major source of funding.