

# **Civil Society within ICT Partnerships: *Moving from Conflict to Confidence***

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*Title* Civil Society within ICT Partnerships: Moving from Conflict to Confidence

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***Abstract:*** In this short treatise, I discuss the challenge of building confidence among potential civil society actors in multi-stakeholder partnerships. The United Nations and other policy governance bodies have slowly been shifting from a state-centric approach toward more multi-stakeholder partnership-type formats. However civil society organizations have not completely accepted these MSPs as their preferred mode of operations within these policy processes. In the first section of this discussion I describe trust as a non-trivial factor in entry and commitment to multi-sector partnership-type policy arrangements. I present a simple typology of the various relationships that civil society actors have had to public policy fora, from “watchdog” to “implementer” roles. Then I enumerate some unique characteristics of civil society that make them particularly sensitive to entering into these kinds of processes. Finally I make eight recommendations for the design and implementation of partnership-type processes to increase trust and buy-in by civil society actors.

# **Civil Society within ICT Partnerships: *Moving from Conflict to Confidence***

By Rik Panganiban<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

We have been asked to address ourselves specifically to the subject of civil society in ICT partnerships, an area we have some expertise and views on. The Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO) has long supported the principle of partnership with the United Nations, its agencies and programmes, as well as with governments and other inter-governmental entities. We ourselves work closely in various capacities with the UN on different of projects pertaining to human rights, capacity building, the Millennium Development Goals, and many other areas.

Most specifically, what I will be speaking about for the next few minutes can be summarized with one word: TRUST.

I will begin by discussing trust as a non-trivial issue in partnerships. Then I sketch a rough typology of the kinds of civil society relationships to various partnership-type arrangements, from opposition to inclusion. Then I discuss some of the unique characteristics of civil society that lead them to be skeptical, wary, and suspicious. Finally I conclude with a number of recommendations for how to increase the confidence of civil society groups in a partnerships to enable their support and active participation.<sup>2</sup>

### **A. What is Trust?**

Let me begin discussing trust as an issue. Trust is a feeling, an emotion. When we enter into an ongoing relationship – whether it be a friendship, a business deal, or marriage – we require a certain amount of confidence in the other party to act in expected ways toward us.

***Who do you trust?*** You trust people who are like you, who you understand, whose perspectives and motivations are known, who you have interacted with over time, who act in a predictable fashion. It's difficult to trust people you don't know, whose motivations and goals are mysterious, who can exert power over you. Trust implies reliability, predictability, shared norms and understandings.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that the views and recommendations I express in this short discussion are my own and do not necessarily represent the policies or positions of CONGO.

Trust is a two-way street. We trust people who show trust in us, and we greet wariness with further wariness.

Adam Peake, a member of the DOT Force, comments on trust-building as an important part of that partnership:

The DOT Force experience made clear that it takes time to build trust between partners. It was an unusually complex mix of international and cross sector partners, and criteria for the selection of partners were often unclear. It took about three face-to-face meetings for the group to begin to produce good work in a efficient manner. The lesson may be that results cannot be expected immediately. Trust increased the feeling of equality in the process, partners were recognized for what they brought to the table, not their name badge. Feelings of commonality of purpose (and as people in our personal goals) increased as we got to know each other.<sup>3</sup>

Why is trust an important issue for multi-stakeholder processes? Simply because without trust, very little is possible. Groups don't partner with others that they don't trust. And with trust, goals that seemed unachievable become possible.

**Partnerships with governments and business is still a controversial subject among much of civil society.** For some groups, partnering with other civil society groups (i.e. in coalitions, networks, etc) is still a fairly new concept. While strong and growing civil society networks existing all over the world, the very nature of the business is one in which entrepreneurship and individuality are the norm.

So moving beyond NGOs to other actors is even more cutting edge. For example, there is almost no mention of the importance of partnerships in the plenary statement of civil society at the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva in December 2003. For many civil society groups, partnerships with other actors are to be considered very deliberately, even skeptically.

That said, the interest of the ICT and development community in multi-stakeholder partnerships is likely to increase rather than decrease over time. The eighth and final UN Millennium Development Goal calls for new kinds of “partnerships for development” including those devoted to making available the benefits of new technologies — especially ICTs.<sup>4</sup>

The WSIS is to be implemented by partnerships. The WSIS Geneva Plan of Action concludes with an appeal for “follow-up and implementation of the Geneva Plan of Action at national, regional and international levels, including the United Nations system, as part of an integrated and coordinated approach, calling upon the participation of all

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<sup>3</sup> Global Knowledge Partnership, 44.

<sup>4</sup> See United Nations Millennium Campaign, <http://www.millenniumcampaign.org>

relevant stakeholders. *This should take place, inter alia, through partnerships among stakeholders.*"<sup>5</sup>

So the question becomes how does one structure a partnership arrangement in such a way that civil society groups are likely to support and participate in it? In other words, how do you build trust? To answer this we have to back up and look at the various ways that civil society interacts with various policy-making fora.

## **B. Range of CS Relationships to Policy Fora**

There are wide range of possible relationships that NGOs and civil society can have to public policy fora. These range from complete opposition to being a central organizer. A quick overview of this spectrum of possible relations can be helpful:

- **Watchdog** – Civil society as observer or alternative media source, informing their own constituencies about what is happening in a given fora. This might be done to supplement traditional media, or to add their own analysis of the key issues and areas for possible action.
- **Adversary** – Civil society protesting the actions of government or the private sector. These can be street demonstrations, petitions, boycotts, civil disobedience, etc. The counter-summit at the WSIS was an example.
- **Advocate** – Civil society lobbying governments or private sector to support their positions. Sometimes groups combine adversarial and advocacy roles, like Amnesty International and GreenPeace.
- **Policy guidance / expert** – Often thinktanks and academic-based NGOs fit this category, but might includes a of different kinds of NGOs.
- **Implementer** – Civil society putting policy into action. I.e. providing volunteers, contractors for governments or UN agencies or foundations, initiating their own projects.

There is strong pressure from a number of fronts to move beyond the traditional adversarial relationship. Indeed, some partnerships are highly motivated by the desire to move civil society groups from protesters to being partners and supporters.

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<sup>5</sup> WSIS Plan of Action, 13

## **C. Unique Characteristics of Civil Society**

Given this range of possible relationships of civil society organizations to various multi-stakeholder initiatives, what are the factors behind the skepticism of many civil society groups? Here are some characteristics of civil society engagement in processes that affect their ability to be trust partnership arrangements:

### **Civil Society Groups are Resource Poor / Knowledge Rich**

With some exceptions, civil society organizations usually operate way beyond their means, with salaries and facilities quite meager in comparison to their peers in government and the private sector. Resources are a significant barrier to civil society participation in various kinds of partnerships and initiatives, particularly ones that require financial contributions to participate (i.e. the International Telecommunications Union, Global Knowledge Partnership).

At the same time, civil society brings to the table expertise and direct experience with various communities that governments and the private sector lack. Thus their participation adds value to any policy-development and implementation partnerships, by enhancing the effectiveness and relevance of a given policy with respect to their areas of expertise.

### **Civil Society are Less Concerned about “Levels” of Participation**

Related to this last point, NGOs are usually more concerned with engaging the most qualified and engaged person in a process rather than the person at the right “level.” Level and status are more important to government and private sector participants. Business sector actors often want to know if they need to involve the CEO’s of their constituencies or just middle managers. Governments want to know if they can send a junior deputy versus a minister. NGOs usually want to know that the person they are interacting with is there to deal, not just acting as a mouthpiece for someone else not in the room.

### **Outsider – Insider Orientation**

As I noted in the typology of civil society engagement, some groups choose to work on the inside of policy processes alongside governments and business, while others choose to work outside via protest or dissent. This is not schizophrenia, it’s strategy. Many groups try and balance and “outsider-insider” orientation – i.e. invited to the high-powered luncheons but ready to storm the barricades if necessary. At the Cancun ministerial meetings of the WTO last year, GreenPeace both sent official representatives to the conference and they organized street demonstrations.

### **Strong Fear of Co-option**

Civil society groups are very concerned about maintaining their independence. They fear co-option by being involved in a process that is out of their control, in which their name is used to support an undesired result or claim. Adam Peake explained well NGO reluctance in engaging in multi-stakeholder arrangements when he noted:

they are concerned that partnering with the private sector and/or government will lessen their ability to act as impartial critics (the “watchdog” role); that involvement in the process can be used to “buy them off”, or be seen to be buying them off; and that such partnerships are always unequal whatever the best intentions.<sup>6</sup>

### **Civil Society Organizations and the Business as Strange Bedfellows**

Partnerships with business are generally more controversial for NGOs than partnerships with governments. The Global Compact is a case in point with some civil society groups engaging in the compact in order to get companies to improve their labor, human rights and environmental standards, and others denouncing the Compact as “blue-washing” corporations.<sup>7</sup>

There are many cultural differences between the business sector and civil society that are important to understand. The UNED Forum noted that:

Businesses... follow principles of profit-orientation, protection of intellectual property, efficiency and speed, whereas many NGOs promote principles of equity, sharing, participation and protection of vulnerable groups, and do not see market mechanisms as the fundamental basis of societies and their development.<sup>8</sup>

Global Knowledge Partnership notes that:

Civil society organizations may be less worried with speed of action, and more with whether the partnership is accountable to those directly affected by such issues as social inclusion and environmental protection. More specifically, within many areas of sustainable development, the relationship between business and not-for-profit organizations has, at times, been confrontational. Consequently, the business and civil society organizations that comprise multi-stakeholder ICT partnerships are likely to have to find *ways to rebuild trust*. [my emphasis]<sup>9</sup>

Choosing which companies to partner with is an enormous challenge for NGOs. Dax Lovegrove, WWF UK’s company relations manager, on which companies to partner with: “You can’t always work with the cleanest companies, and there’s no point just preaching to the converted. As long as your partners are willing to accept challenging targets, they are the ones you should be working with.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Global Knowledge Partnership, 44

<sup>7</sup> For a good summary and list of sources on the UN Global Compact debate, go to <http://www.globalpolicy.org/reform/indxbiz.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Hemmati, 62.

<sup>9</sup> Global Knowledge Partnership, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Cowe.

On the other hand, if global business is becoming in some instances more powerful than governments, than civil society groups often feel increasing pressure to try and influence the operations of business. As Randall Hayes, founder of the Rainforest Action Network put it: ‘If you [as an NGO] are not talking to business, you are just preaching to the choir. The real change to protect the environment is going to come from the business sector; we can’t depend on government regulation to solve our problems.’<sup>11</sup>

Thus we can see a number of reasons why civil society organizations are wary of partnerships with other actors. Let us explore some ways of overcoming that wariness and build trust.

## **D. Conclusions: Eight Recommendations for How to Build Civil Society Confidence**

Based on this discussion, there are a number of recommendations that one can make for establishing effective partnerships with civil society, that can build trust. Moving civil society organizations from an adversarial role to a partnership role can be made easier through a number of means. Here are my suggestions:

### **1. Debate is Good**

An artificial exchange that minimizes conflict will be less meaningful than a honest exchange of views. NGOs are particularly sensitive to overly diplomatic language that ignores areas of strong divergence and debate. Allow time and space for venting. It might help to create private and semi-private settings for partners to have honest and meaningful exchanges, with clear rules of engagement and light moderation. Anriette Esterhuysen, director of Association for Progressive Communications, even suggests that disagreement be as much an indicator of success as consensus.<sup>12</sup>

### **2. Ensure Meaningful Participation by All Stakeholders**

Don’t send in the interns or the junior staff to partnership meetings. It does not have to be your secretary general or CEO, but it should be someone with expertise in the areas of concern and with some decision-making authority. Most importantly, it should be the same people over time, not a rotating list of faceless bureaucrats. As Mark Surman, partner at the Commons Group, notes:

All partnerships – including multistakeholder partnerships – rely on the interactions of individuals. Those partnerships that work best almost always include a key player from each of the parties who have established a personal affinity and shared vision. It is often this vision and affinity that give partnerships

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<sup>11</sup> SustainAbility, 30

<sup>12</sup> Esterhuysen.

their most powerful fuel, providing the drive to move through conflict and bureaucratic hurdles.<sup>13</sup>

Anriette Esterhuysen comments on the difficulty of getting the mix right:

The UN ICT Task Force... has not, in spite of very good intentions, succeeded in effectively providing adequate space to civil society, developing country governments and private sector, the research sector, young people, artists, the media... and more. The Global Knowledge Partnership... have also struggled to achieve balance between different sectors. As the number of members from civil society has grown; government, donor and large-scale corporate member numbers have declined.<sup>14</sup>

### **3. Recruit Good Moderators**

It can be helpful to recruit individuals with personal understanding of the cultural and structural differences among the various partners, and the ability to structure a dialogue amidst those differences. Individuals with experience with different kinds of institutions – NGO, business, government, international agency, parliament, etc. – may be particularly qualified for this role. A moderator with exclusively a business background, for example, would certainly be viewed with suspicion and distrust by some civil society representatives.

Multi-stakeholder processes should ideally be facilitated by people who are not stakeholders and have no direct interest in the outcome of the process, if possible. At the very least the facilitator should be upfront about their own priorities and interests, and be generally accepted by all the partners. In many cases, the United Nations or an agency of the UN plays this facilitator / moderator role.

### **4. Establish Clear, Fair Rules of Order**

Civil society organizations worry that their participation is not considered equally in comparison to governments and business entities. These concerns can be alleviated by establishing clear rules of order, including how discussions are conducted, how decisions are made, and how the agenda is arrived at. Without clear rules of engagement, many groups worry that their rights of participation can be easily diminished or revoked when sensitive matters come to the table.

People tend to be suspicious of people who have power over them. Design rules of engagement that ensure equal participation for stakeholders. Decision making should ideally be done by consensus. Voting procedures tend to emphasize differences and inequalities, which consensus processes emphasis agreement and dialogue. Upfront policy of equal participation regardless of contributions or resources.

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<sup>13</sup> Global Knowledge Partnership , P. 52

<sup>14</sup> Esterhuysen.

These rules of order should be written down, and perhaps be made part of a partnership agreement or Memorandum of Understanding among the partners. This can help increase predictability and minimize insecurity in the process.

### **5. State Clear Partnerships Criteria**

Inevitably, civil society organizations will question why some groups were included as partners in some initiative while others were not. Often there are accusations of some kind of “old boys club,” purposely excluding Southern participants, sexism, ageism and other allegations. These kinds of controversies can be avoided by stating clearly what the partnership criteria are. Among the possible criteria are: level of involvement in an issue area, explicit endorsement of a set of principles or goals, geography (i.e. country-level partnerships), willingness to participate physically or electronically, individual expertise, representing key stakeholders, and ability to commit formally to the partnership.

### **6. Provide Support**

As I stated, civil society groups are resource poor / knowledge rich. So they often will need support at various levels. Partnerships may need to establish special trust funds and other means to enable civil society to meaningfully participate. This should not be seen as charity but as ensuring the effectiveness of the partnership by bringing to the table those who have the expertise and experience to make the goals of the partnership happen.

One encouraging step was the UN Secretary-General’s 2004 recommendations calling for a trust fund for civil society participation at the UN and an enhanced “partnerships” office at the UN to facilitate the UN’s engagement with NGOs, the private sector and parliamentarians.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately the lack of enthusiasm shown by member states for the Secretary General’s proposals means that they are effectively dead, or at least on hold.

### **7. Enable other Partners to Learn about Civil Society**

It often is not obvious to a business representative or government official what the priorities and cultural assumptions of civil society groups are. So spending some time educating them on the culture, work, priorities and importance of civil society would be very helpful. UNITAR has decades of experience training government representatives for various negotiations, which could be expanded to include how to work effectively with civil society and the private sector at the UN.<sup>16</sup>

These kind of training and orientation sessions can help build a welcoming environment and tone that promotes a virtuous cycle of trust. This can be particularly important in ICT-related fora, where the role of civil society actors may not be commonly understood or accepted by others. For example within the UN Task Force on ICT Financing a number of government representatives did not accept that civil society had any role in ICT financing besides as a recipient of funding.<sup>17</sup> These kinds of misunderstandings could be avoided with carefully planned training and orientation sessions.

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<sup>15</sup> Annan, 12.

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.unitar.org>

<sup>17</sup> Personal observation.

## 8. Use Creative Means to Develop Trust

Allow spaces for informal interaction, coffees, after meeting drinks, spontaneous exchanges, “off-topic” online discussions, etc. An overly formal and rigid meeting procedure can stifle the forming of strong relationships.

Over time, these less formal interactions can build comradery, common understandings, friendships, community across different organizations. This can enable new alliances to form along common interests such as in South Africa, where internet service providers, community telecentres, ICT NGOs, community media organizations and small phone-shops (telecentres) all have a common interest in legalizing voice over internet protocol.<sup>18</sup>

These are only a few small suggestions. I hope that these recommendations can help UNESCO and other partnership “champions” to develop partnership arrangements that can gain the full support of civil society.

### *Specific Recommendations for UNESCO*

1. UNESCO should have a central role as a facilitating organization for follow-up to the WSIS on issues falling within the mandate of UNESCO pertaining to ICT “content.” These would include cultural diversity, multilingualism, freedom of expression, freedom of the media, and artistic expression.
2. UNESCO should model effective ICT partnerships with civil society and the private sector for other institutions. I.e. demonstrate balanced representation, equal participation, transparent operations, and focused work plans.
3. UNESCO should encourage other stakeholders to engage in partnerships with civil society. Support capacity building for government and corporate officers on importance of including civil society in ICT partnerships. Develop programs to train civil society organizations on how to initiate partnerships with governments and business.
4. UNESCO should catalyze the development of new ICT multi-stakeholder partnerships. Utilize matching technologies to facilitate new partnerships, similar to web-based tools developed for the World Summit on Sustainable Development and WSIS-online.net.
5. UNESCO should reach beyond the traditional UNESCO NGO community, to incorporate other NGO communities focusing on the United Nations, the ITU, regional, national, and grassroots networks. ICTs can help facilitate diverse contributions from civil society into policy processes.

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<sup>18</sup> Esterhuysen

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