

Civil Society Organizations: Time for Systemic Strategies

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have long achieved many successes in addressing global problems like climate change, food insecurity, droughts, resource scarcity and poverty. But despite these many victories, we are now facing an unprecedented environmental and social crisis.

Increasingly civil society leaders are putting into question the efficacy of current strategies and search for new promising ways that tackle the systemic and cultural root causes of the global crises. Here we show a number of key opportunities for CSOs to fulfill their potential as effective change agents.

The Need for a Course Correction

As economic development improves the material conditions of millions, the earth's capacity to supply resources such as fresh drinking water and clean air and absorb waste is being exceeded. The consumption habits of a growing global middle class are intensifying the pressure on the planet's ecosystems, with greatest impact on the poorest, most vulnerable communities (e.g. droughts in Africa or floods in Bangladesh).

Local solutions are often unavailable when the causes of climate change, biodiversity loss and other problems are far removed geographically and the effects fall most heavily upon future generations. Conventional approaches to solving global problems break down the problems into manageable pieces, but because of the complexity of the system this often leads to unintended consequences somewhere else in the system. Issues are interlinked: a response to one problem can lead to a different problem, for example, the adoption of intensive agriculture to address food scarcity can lead to soil degradation and greenhouse gas emissions.

It is important to ask whether governments, business and civil society organizations (CSOs)ⁱ are taking into account in their responses the complexity of the economic and ecological system. The dominant paradigm of free markets and economic growth bind the actions of governments, business, individuals and other social actors, constraining them from developing effective responses to the

crises they confront. Governments are reluctant to act, caught between the need for tough remedial action and the short-term imperatives of economic growth. Businesses, due to the nature of financial markets and the pressure to grow shareholder value, are limited in their actions. Individual consumers' behavior and motivations are deeply entrenched in social norms and limited by unhelpful economic incentives, and even when stepping out of their roles as consumers can have little individual impact on the structural and cultural dynamics that are driving the crises.

The other social actors with the potential to tackle global problems are civil society organizations (including well known NGOs like Greenpeace, WWF, Oxfam, Transparency International etc.). With their mission of serving society's interests, CSOs have made a positive difference. Moreover, CSOs are seen as the most trusted social actors. A poll of nearly 5,000 people in 22 countries found that non-governmental organizations command trust among 62 percent of the public, more than business, government or the media.ⁱⁱ Although they have the capacity and mandate to be an important force in confronting intertwined global challenges, in the face of worsening environmental and social trends, many CSOs are recognizing that their current strategies may not be sufficient to address the structural and cultural drivers of today's crises. A recent survey of CSO leaders suggests some core reasons.ⁱⁱⁱ

First, most large national and international CSOs tend to pragmatically focus on short-term solutions instead of tackling root causes. This approach often leads to tackling the symptoms in the short-run but doesn't solve the problems in the long-run..

Second, as a direct consequence, much CSO work focuses on national and international advocacy, within a business-as-usual-political context that prevents far-reaching societal change. The failure of the Copenhagen summit on climate change in 2009 demonstrated that scientific rational arguments would not be enough to move the global political system to take strong action. Third, most large national and international CSOs focus on single issues like e.g. climate change, marine protection or poverty alleviation. This specialization undermines the realization of connections across issues and effective collaborations across organisations. A prominent example for this is the disconnect between demands of human rights organizations which for very long were not taking into account the existence of ecological limits in their demands and vice versa environmental organizations pursuing policies which don't sufficiently take care of equity and human rights aspects.

With the planet hitting biophysical limits and economic growth failing to support poverty alleviation, it becomes clear that an issue-by-issue approach within conventional development values and institutional structures is not working. It cannot take us to the alternative path of sustainable and equitable development so urgently needed, where the environment is sustained for current and future generations and where the benefits of economic activity are widely and equitably shared. Such a transition will require broad and deep change across all areas: technology, legislation, economic and governance institutions, social relations, culture and values. Therefore, CSO strategies must

emphasize that a focus on small step improvements will be insufficient and, indeed, might even undermine the possibility of transformative change. Instead, CSOs need to urgently develop and put into practice strategies that embrace the cultural and systemic root causes lying behind the social and environmental crises of our times.

Leveraging CSOs' Full Potential

If the narrow policy approach has failed to galvanize enough public support to drive the political will for more radical government action, CSOs need to fundamentally redesign their strategies. This will require CSOs to leave behind their current fragmentation and start working towards a common and coherent vision for a sustainable future and actions that address root causes – human values, lifestyles and economic structures – rather than the symptoms like CO₂ emissions or inequality. On that basis, CSOs need to rethink and redesign the ways they work and try to influence the political, social and human systems towards sustainability.

1. A new vision: Nobody knows exactly how we will achieve a sustainable world, or what it will look like. There is a need for a broad diversity of ideas, approaches and policies to experiment with. Differences in history, culture, geography etc. will ensure and require a broad range of different visions and pathways. However, the more CSOs can agree on the core values and principles for a transition to sustainability, the more successful change agents they will become. The Great Transition is such a *flexible vision* for a sustainable global economy and society. It was originally developed by the Global Scenario Group^{iv} with a deliberate analogy to *The Great Transformation*, the book written by Karl Polanyi about the Industrial Revolution^v. The Great Transition implies that deep systemic change similar to the Industrial Revolution is required. It demands that societal values and life styles, as well as the structures of the current economic system, which are not set in stone, *must* change if we want to have a serious chance to tackle today's global crises. The Great Transition has the potential to align a very diverse range of CSO sectors, such as developmental and environmental NGOs, community groups, faith-based organizations, and trade unions, under one unifying vision, thereby providing a new source of collective strength.

2. Embedding systems thinking in CSO practice: Adequately addressing the pressing global problems, like climate change, requires understanding the complex interlinkages within the wider system of which they are a part. Since neither traditional issue by issue approaches or linear cause-effect analysis are adequate, deeper systemic change in our culture and the economy is needed to tackle interconnected sustainability issues. It is therefore essential for success that CSOs start using the variety of system thinking tools available to examine system structures and develop strategies that enable them to navigate through system complexity. Examples are organizational learning processes, individual capacity building and leadership programs.

3. Developing a new narrative: Recognition that a sustainable economy must radically reduce its resource consumption and waste is in tension with the dominant materialistic and individualistic values that form the basis of today's unsustainable consumption patterns. However, many current CSO strategies appeal to these dominant values (e.g., through the use of green marketing approaches) with the danger of reinforcing them. CSOs need to become more aware of the important long-term trade-offs of these pragmatic approaches and ultimately align their strategies to emergent sustainability values. Indeed, CSOs can nurture a shift in cultural values by fostering collaboration across the range of different CSO sectors embodying values of community, affiliation and resilience. Such coalescences can advance a narrative and practice consistent with the principles of a Great Transition: the wellbeing of society, global empathy and the rights of future generations.

Mainstream policy discourse opens many windows for CSOs acting together to have an indirect impact on values. Perhaps the most striking example is the current debate in many countries on introducing alternative indicators to GDP (e.g., France, Germany, Austria, and the UK). Since national governments increasingly acknowledge that excessive focus on GDP growth hurts rather than helps society and the environment, CSOs should create large cross-sector alliances to push these governments to take the big step from talk to implementation of new indicators that make well-being and environmental sustainability the key measures of successful development. This would create the important change in the national narrative from a fixation on "economic growth" to attention to the many dimensions of "societal well-being".

This deep shift in worldview requires overcoming the nature-culture divide by understanding humanity as a part of the environment and nurturing the design of institutions matched to the imperative of our increasingly interdependent world. To be effective, the new narrative must inspire and engage, offering a positive long term societal vision based on equality and well-being, rather than consumer-based growth. In exploring new cultural values and fresh approaches, CSOs face the challenge of moving beyond the status quo. The Great Transition offers an opportunity for CSOs to collaboratively transform their "special interests" and narrow policy expertise through the co-creation of a narrative aligning different social sectors under an umbrella of common values and principles. This new narrative must speak to the hearts and minds of a very large number of people through a creative compelling story of who we are and where we want to go.

4. Supporting system innovation: A shift toward a Great Transition future will require complex learning processes and fundamental innovations. Due to their narrow and short-term focus, national politics, international negotiations and large corporations cannot alone deliver this fundamental change of direction. Therefore, CSOs should get more actively involved in catalyzing bottom-up innovation initiatives as well as supporting and linking change agents who otherwise remain isolated in their communities and organizations. For example, larger environmental and development NGOs could support and partner with bottom-up initiatives, working to link change agents, thus helping to cross-fertilize solutions and build movement connectivity. Initiatives that

cultivate system innovation for the new economy and society can be found at all levels: community, city, industry, and government. They promote change by developing new institutions and challenging entrenched attitudes.^{vi} New models of production, consumption, organization, ownership, and governance developed through bottom-up innovation rooted in local traditions and resources is a key element in the story of a Great Transition.

5. Supporting a new global movement: In the decades following the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, strengthening of grassroots political movements has played a subordinate role to policy advocacy and partnership with governmental agencies and business.^{vii} Yet, during a time of deepening crises, a Great Transition can only succeed with the emergence of a global citizen movement that would “embrace diverse perspectives and existing movements as separate expressions of a common project”.^{viii}

Despite the need for synergy, the potential among existing movements is severely limited by current political realities. Social movements seeking to ally in the global justice movement, including indigenous, feminist, labor, peasant, human rights, environmental and socialist formations, have difficulty moving beyond protest to articulate a common proactive agenda. Issues, priorities and even goals often conflict. For their part, CSOs have increasingly been transformed from participatory, democratic and grassroots forms into professional, oligarchic, and non-participatory “Astroturf” organizations. This needs to change.

Because it is unlikely that a global citizen movement will spontaneously emerge through bottom-up self-organization, CSOs can play a crucial role on various fronts to help facilitate its birth and development. In order for such a movement to crystallize, civil society must overcome the current “politics of opposition” and develop new models of leadership and collaboration.

For example, The Widening Circle campaign to advance a global citizens movement anticipates a phased process of organizational development, beginning with a relatively small group of committed people, supported by loose networks of individuals and organizations (Raskin 2010a: 4).^{ix} CSOs can support the expansion of these kinds of initiatives by providing their resources and expertise. Additionally, large CSO networks can use the combined power and trust to inspire their members and broader range of citizens towards a global citizen movement.

6. Engaging funders in systemic CSO strategies: CSOs will require funding to effectively shift toward systemic strategies This is a major challenge, since one of the main causes of CSO fragmentation is that “the interests of donors and the dynamics of professional organizations tend to favor a narrow issue oriented approach to work, encouraging NGOs to specialize in delineated niches (or “issue silos”)” (Kriegman 2006: 4)^x. Therefore, CSOs will need to work with change agents in the funding community and bring the case for a more comprehensive strategy to funders. Such a shift will require adapting monitoring and evaluation schemes to align with the requirements of strategies for systemic change, which tend to be longer term and more uncertain than conventional projects. In

addition to efforts to broaden the perspectives and adjust the priorities of traditional sources, alternative sources of support, such as crowd-funding^{xi}, might gain more prominence.

A Way Forward: The Smart CSOs Lab

We have argued that CSOs can play a vital role in realizing the potential of a Great Transition. To pursue this objective, a new initiative, the Smart CSOs Lab has been created with participants from a diverse range of organizations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Action Aid, Transparency International, Tellus Institute, new economics foundation among many others. They are working across disciplines in a community of practice to build effective CSO strategies for advancing a Great Transition. The initiative will support CSO leaders and change agents in the development of cohesive strategies for CSO campaigns and projects. It will develop and test capacity building programs that support staff to enable these new strategies. It will also catalyze critical research on how CSOs can more effectively influence the social and political systems towards a Great Transition.

Smart CSOs will encourage CSOs to move beyond piecemeal and fragmentary responses to developing strategies that align with a social and economic Great Transition. Ultimately the aim is to change the course of CSO strategies to contribute to mobilizing a global movement and generating massive political will for deep change. Is it possible to achieve this shift within the closing window of time available? History suggests that at critical moments, cultural values can shift relatively rapidly. In truth, though, we do not know what can be achieved if CSOs across the board start now to work with self-conscious purpose on influencing cultural values and promoting a new global paradigm. The size and influence of the CSO sector in many countries gives hope that, with such a program, something significant could be achieved.

Recasting of CSO strategies for the pressing imperatives of our moment is driven by a wider dynamic of transformation, and in turn will shape the outcome of that transformation.

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ⁱ This paper focuses on large, professional environment and development CSOs.

ⁱⁱ Edelman. 2010 Edelman Trust Barometer. An Annual Global Opinion Leaders Study

(<http://www.edelman.com/trust/2010/>).

ⁱⁱⁱ The survey was conducted by means of in-depth interviews of a select group of 22 representatives from CSOs and research organizations (conducted by author as part of the Action Town Project).

^{iv} P. Raskin et al. *Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead*. Boston, MA: Tellus Institute, 2002

(http://www.gtinitiative.org/documents/Great_Transitions.pdf).

^v Karl Polanyi. *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944)

^{vi} C. Leggewie, C. and H. Welzer. “Another Great Transformation?”, *Social and Cultural Consequences of Climate Change*. *Journal of Renewable and Sustainable Energy*, 2(3), 2010.

^{vii} J. Speth. *The Bridge at the end of the world: Capitalism, the Environment, and the Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008.

^{viii} P. Raskin. “Planetary Praxis” in *The Coming Transformation: Values to Sustain Human and Natural Communities* by S. Kellert and G. Speth, Eds. New Haven: Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, 2010.

^{ix} P. Raskin. “Imagine All the People: Advancing a global citizens movement.” *GTI Perspectives on Critical Issues*. 2010 (http://www.gtinitiative.org/documents/IssuePerspectives/GTI-Perspectives-Imagine_All_the_People.pdf).

^x O. Kriegman. “Dawn of the Cosmopolitan: The Hope of a Global Citizens Movement.” *GTI Paper Series*. Boston, MA: Tellus Institute, 2006 (<http://www.gtinitiative.org/documents/PDFFINALS/15Movements.pdf>).

^{xi} “Crowd-funding” describes the collective cooperation, attention and trust of people who pool their money and other resources, usually via the Internet, to support efforts initiated by others.