

TERRAVIVA

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Relationship problems among NGOs

DIVERSE & DIFFERENT



Civil society needs to look at how it engages with the formal democratic institutions. It has a responsibility to strengthen itself but also needs to breathe new life into formal democracy

Sit within the group, and you see the differences. Look at it from the outside, and those differences might just begin to look like collective introspection.

That, just about, was what a host of civil society organisations got up to at the CIVICUS World Assembly of civil society organisations in Glasgow this week called by CIVICUS and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO).

The introspection covered the range from troubled civil society relations with government, and how it must address its own failings.

“We came to a greater recognition that civil society needs to look at how it engages with the formal democratic institutions,” Civicus secretary-general Kumi Naidoo told Terraviva towards the end of the conference.

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Unions and civil society declared love to each other

Utopia of decent work

The right to work is more than getting a job. ILO's head, Juan Somavia, calls for a wide agreement to put job creation at the top of economic policies. A handicapped Lebanese participant raised a powerful complaint: disabled workers are ignored.

When the mini-plenary on "decent work" was close to decide yesterday that between trades unions and civil society there is nothing but a love affair, Sylvana Lakkis, from Lebanon, raised her voice from her wheel-chair to protest against all of them, plus the World Bank, the ILO and governments for the oblivion people like her are left with all the time.

Lakkis, the chair person of the Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union, noted that in a pamphlet handed out to participants, for example, there was no mention of the disabled. Her remarks prompted all panelists to make clear that their organisation, at least, did not forget the disabled, quoting constitutions, rules and regulations.

She said to TerraViva later that the neglect of the disabled is the result of "inherited stereotypes", which portray the disabled as "people who should be taken care of", instead of promoting their right to be independent. "It is an emotional approach, rather than one based on the universal principles of human rights", she said.

"We make up 600 million people in the world. That is a huge number. And the World Bank says that one in six poor people, has a disability. This condition should then be an indicator of poverty, but it is never a cross cutting issue in any development report, not even in the Millennium Development Goals", she said.

Of course, everybody agreed and she was applauded.

Panelists and participants took good care of underlying the many common elements between the labour movement and civil society groups. For Guy Ryder, General Secretary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), a common feature is that both are democratic in nature, responsible to their memberships and committed to fight injustice and inequalities.



Sylvana Lakkis: Human rights are for all humans

Not just a job

Decent work is a concept developed by the United Nations' International Labour Organisation, whose Director general, Juan Somavia, was present in the room as a participant. Its objective, Somavia said, is to "recover the dignity of work" as a human right and put it on top of economic policies, which now is not the case.

"Work today is an adjustment factor. When companies and governments announce adjustments, what they adjust is work" he said, and then posted a question to all those represented here: "Are we going to fight together for the dignity of work?"

All participants agreed that bad jobs are not the answer to unemployment, as it seems to be the case in many developing countries and some in the audience criticised policies in industrial countries against the rights of migrant workers, subject to persecution and exploitation.

Lord George Foulkes, a former UK minister and current chair of CIVICUS' Scottish host committee, recalled that at a vote in yesterday's main plenary on the credibility of various organisations and trade unions scored a mere two percent, revealing that, in spite of all the talk about common traits, there is something that must be corrected.

Lord George rejected what he called the "blanket criticism" that sometimes civil society groups heap on "all governments and all politicians", pointing out that people like Nelson Mandela is also a politician, as are the leaders of the Nordic countries, where workers enjoy wide social and economic rights.

One participant raised the issue of mistrust between civil society groups and trades unions, which, he said, is probably based on "the long history" of political manipulations, corruption and even mafia connections of labour organisations ranging from China and the Soviet Union, to the United States and Argentina.

Ryder, the ICFTU leader, said that all who have worked in the union movement know about the commitment and honesty of most unionists. "Yes, China and the Soviet Union gave us a bad name, but we already won in the Soviet Union while in China the fight goes on", he said.

Lord George, on his part, queried, ironically, whether the Mafia could be considered civil society as well.

► Alejandro Kirk

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Divide is not just digital

Civil society media must work together for change

Media – old and new – need to become more coherent if change is to be affected.

Over the three days of the CIVICUS World Assembly, there have been very few debates that have not featured a call for ‘better communication’ or an ‘improvement in messaging to government’. Issues surrounding the media and particularly the use of technologies such as the internet are providing both challenges and opportunities for civil society.

In a debate in the main auditorium, Mario Lubetkin, the Director General, of Inter-Press Service (IPS), raised both an opportunity and posed a question to the audience.

“Civil Society is trusted,” he said, “look at any of the polls and you see that we come at the top. However, how can we build our message with both mainstream media and different media?” He said GCAP (Global Campaign for Action on Poverty) was a great example of how a civil society campaign had succeeded in capturing the world’s imagination and how a simple but effective message had produced great results. “The GCAP campaign produced so many press clippings from all over the world. But the World Social Forum was not as well covered in the mainstream media. This is a challenge for us to overcome.”

Superpower media

He said that to succeed, alternative or as he put it ‘different’ media need to work together to help promote civil society causes



Media panel: Thinking more superpowers

and campaigns and to as he put it, “to build together a new superpower media.”

Baishali Rinku Sen, the publisher of Color Lines, a US-based publication that focuses on race issues, stressed the need for simplicity of messages and said that her own publication had made a concerted effort to be more appealing to a mass audience..

Hassen Lorgat, who deals with communications issues for the South African NGO Coalition, said that media was a “tool for long-term substantive change but we must work with those that can lever power.” He pointed out that in his experience alliances with church groups and trade unions had provided fertile territory for campaigning work in South Africa.

Lorgat sounded a warning about the use of new media campaigning techniques and said that getting angry online did not necessarily translate into action. “Cyber-activism is easy, the 1 in

9 campaign (which highlighted the poor record of rape prosecutions in South Africa) was a success on the internet but there were often only 20 of us in the real world campaigns,” he said. “We need to move beyond the computer to really build power.”

Parminder Jeet Singh, the Executive Director of New Information Society in India, got right into the nature of information. “Information needs outcomes, otherwise it’s just information ... as activists deal with these new tools we also need to – at the same time – deal with the politics of media.”

Us and them

Various contributions from the floor painted a picture of disillusionment with media. One contributor from Chile said that the media in general were ignoring human rights stories and another accused media of not providing suitable support for people with disabilities. Hassen Lorgat answered by saying that when

people experienced ignorance or bad journalism then they should be prepared to complain and the disabled people needed to be assisted to truly realise the power of new technology.

This general distrust of the media continued in various contributions from the floor but Mario Lubetkin countered strongly. “The challenge is for ‘us’ not just for ‘the media.’” He spoke of the need for stronger messages but also more participation from individuals.

Despite the quite fractured nature of the debate and the number of sub-strands of thought it would be fair to say that the issue of new media and its implication for civil society appeared to provide some answers but also many questions. And after all when you consider that only 10 per cent of the world has internet access then so-called old media will continue to play an important role in campaigning, activism and social change.

► Gavin Yates

Civic disruption

A force more powerful

As debate on non-violent vs violent protest goes on, peaceful protests have succeeded in some countries. There are others like Palestine, which have had to mix the two to fight their cause.

What does an occupied people do when their non-violent protests are met with bullets and armoured vehicles? What does a people do when over 50 years of peaceful protests has only begotten more brutal reprisals?

There were the questions Palestinian Huwaida Arraf asked in the discussion on why civil disruption can lead to civil liberty. She not only answered her own question, but she also spread out the responsibility of achieving the aspirations of Palestinians to the global community.

Arraf said in the over fifty years that the Palestinians had been in conflict with Israel, ninety nine percent of their resistance had been non-violent.

Palestinians had boycotted Israeli goods, but this did not have too much effect because they were a small population without jobs and other forms of income, giving them a limited purchasing power. The few Palestinians who had their jobs lost them when Israel decided to import foreign workers. Palestinians who are historically self-sufficient in everything have been slowly starved by Israel which refuses to allow food, water and other goods into their areas, she says.

Peaceful resistance first

She described some of the non-violence tactics that were used by the Palestinians during the first intifada (shake off the occupation) where people were organised into cells and peacefully resisted Israel occupation.

"We thwarted Israel curfews by setting up our own curfews," she recounted. "This irritated the Israelis who would force shop owners to open up, but our people refused or just simply left their shops

until the next day if the soldiers broke the locks on the door. We also refused to pay taxes."

She said even the children were involved in this peaceful resistance. They would tie empty cans to the tails of wild cats. As the cats roamed the streets at night, the cans would make noise and send the Israeli soldiers into a frenzy as they thought the noise was coming from Palestinians breaking the curfew.

While not saying that peaceful resistance had failed, she insisted violence was not the answer. "Violence begets violence, nothing is won permanently with violence. We have no army so we cannot fight, we cannot retaliate with tanks or missiles."

She said however that there would be more success if the international community got involved and gave examples of how when Americans, Italians, Spaniards or Canadians join peaceful protest marches, the Israeli's were less 'trigger happy' and used rubber bullets instead of real bullets and dispersed protestors with tear gas.

"When we say we are not terrorists no one listens, but when the international media says Palestinians are not terrorists, at least a few more people listen so we need the support of the world community," she notes.

"We need the world to act in the way they did over Apartheid in South Africa, wholesale pressure and sanctions, and we need a media that does not portray Palestinians as a terrorist group when they retaliate against Israeli aggression."

Unity in protest

Another panelist from Serbia, Srdja Popovic, who is co-founder of the Centre for Applied Non Violent

Huwaida Arraf: A light of freedom for Palestine



Action and Strategies (CANVAS), said there was no cut and paste solutions in non-violent struggle.

Popovic was involved in the popular uprising which removed former Serbian leader Slobadan Milosevic and he believes the skills that people bring into the struggle are more important than the condition they live in.

"No matter how dire or desperate the situation, there was always a peaceful solution that could be employed, it just needs strategy and planning."

He gave a bullet point for success of non-violent protests: unity- there must be mass mobilisation and a common vision; non-violent discipline, realising that peaceful resistance was not only a moral issue but it provided a permanent solution.

However, Judy Mckinon from the United Kingdom wondered why, if peaceful protests had obviously not worked in Palestine, people should not be encouraged to meet fire with fire. She said the

situation in Palestine was special and different from the other places like Serbia where peaceful protests have worked.

"Serbia had a simple constitutional issue to deal with. It had the support of Europe which feared the spread of Islam. The thing that makes the Palestinian issue impossible is that the people did not have a country."

Peter Ackerman, founder and chair of the International Centre on Non Violent conflict who facilitated the session, was a little more optimistic, he said even under severe and harsh environments there was a space for non-violence. He said when the button of repression was pushed down, people need to rise up. He did not believe the situation of Palestine was hopeless, as there was always possibilities. He said once there was a clarity of goals and articulation of aspirations, any cause could garner outside support and succeed.

► Zarina Geloo

Money matters

Empowerment transactions

When both money and power are given to women, the country is certain to develop in leaps and bounds. But getting your hands on both is indeed an uphill task, or as Nouzha Skalli, member of the parliament in Morocco, pointed out “a long, hard struggle”.

While there is reason to tap aid money, some development leaders feel they should be practical and have no qualms about taking ‘charity’ dished out by the corporate sector. And while they are at it, they can ensure that the profits made by these companies are invested in the health, education and environmental sustainability of the developing countries business sets up shop in.

Refusing to be cowed down by repeated humiliations, she ran for elections ten times before finally winning a seat and assures you getting to the parliament is only half the battle won. You can have a win-win situation only when you look at things from the top “wearing gendered glasses”.

While there is just a miniscule 10.8% women elected representatives in Morocco, women are not happy to sit on their laurels and are creating quite a ruckus in the parliament. “We are trying to revive family laws, which lay dormant for 30 years, and have brought out a semblance of reforms pertaining to marriage, inheritance, divorce etc,” said Skalli in broken English.

But she believes that the biggest victory of the rise in women speaking out in Morocco has not been facing up to the extremist opposition that took against them for “touting anti-Islamic views and a western agenda” but that when women got some power, they took over the le-



Noeleen Heyzer, of Unifem

gal framework, brought about transformation of the budget and not only represented the female voice but demanded accountability.

This example served well at a plenary on development financing, where strong female development leaders decided how they would like the resources to be used to empower women and to lift them out of the trap of poverty.

With a whopping \$50 billion being pumped into development aid worldwide as of 2010, and half of that directed at Africa, there has been an increasing demand by women for a just share in this expanding development pie. And they don’t just want to tap the aid money but also cash coming from other sources – such as the corporate sector.

“Why not,” said Sylvia Borren, director of Novib-Oxfam, Netherlands. “I’m in favour of using their charitable funding, I’m practical, we’ll take the money.”

However she believes that the multi-nationals are not paying taxes, asking for export free zones and not

investing their profits in the developing countries they set up shop in. “They should be taxed to put their money in health and education as part of corporate social responsibility and asked to go for fair wages and be responsible for the environment.”

It is the women and the children who are, after all, standing on the last rung of those most marginalised. A staggering 10.6 million children die before reaching their fifth birthday, of which more than four million die within the first week of being born. And half a million women die in childbirth. This was emphasised by Borren, previously chairing one of the plenaries on philanthropy but she obviously thought it needed to be rubbed in again. “We know how to stop this but the money is not flowing in” she said with urgency in her tone.

“Governments are not engaging with civil society in general and women in particular, women who are working in their voluntary capacity offering money and time to decrease these miserable figures.” According

to her, if the Millennium Development Goals are to be reached, there is a need for more democratic ownership of and transparent use of resources.

“We don’t get transparent figures,” she protested though. “We need to be more demanding of political powers and governments. Women need to take on transformational leadership roles” to divert the money used for militarization and supporting fragile states towards education and health. In other words she implored women to “move into bigger space” and think big, demand more, and find allies.

Not happy with “just a share in the pie”, Devaki Jain, Institute of Social Studies Trust, terming women and women movements “dividends” called for a “need to claim the local and national space and let women design how best to use the development resources.” She however, felt that money was not the only way that women can be brought out of the poverty trap. “Perhaps money can be diverted from social spending to women’s livelihood programmes.”

It naturally fell to Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, President, African Women’s Development Fund, Nigeria, to tackle the problem. Her interpretation of the situation is a negative one.. “There are a lot of agreements but nothing positive can be seen on the ground,” she said adding that while gender has become “out of fashion”, gender mainstreaming has taken the “steam out of women movements”.

“In November 2004, we had a Beijing review and the question asked was – are we moving forwards, backward or are at the same spot? We came up with a very interesting and insightful answer which was – that it was a combination of all three,” she continued.

► **Zofeen T. Ebrahim**

Participants share experiences and gain new insights within the confines of the Exhibition Centre at CIVICUS World Assembly. And beyond it, too.

With sun out on and off, following in the tradition of the World Assembly, Friday afternoon was Learning Exchange time when groups of delegates were taken to visit local civil society organisations.

From the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh to the Gorbals Art Project, just a 10 minute drive along the road from the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, where this year's World Assembly is being held, delegates visited a wide variety of different locations.

The Deserve project in Dunoon, which involved a ferry trip across the Clyde and a return journey through rural Scotland along the banks of Loch Lomond was, perhaps deservedly so, the most popular event after the Scottish Parliament.

Although the trip didn't return to Glasgow until 8pm, delegates enjoyed the opportunity to hear how rural Scotland has formed links with communities in Sweden, Iceland and Finland to learn how to develop stronger models of service delivery. Though they also enjoyed the chance to view some of the beautiful countryside around Glasgow.

Arts and cultural activities also proved to be a big hit with delegates – with people heading off to one of Glasgow's most popular art gallery The Burrell Collection, as well community radio and video projects and arts development groups.

Uniting Community

Terraviva went to one of the city's poorest areas with a group of delegates attracted by the promise of a good story and found out how one faith-based



voluntary organisation is using the art of oral story telling to unite the community.

Five year's ago the congregation at St James' Parish Church decided they didn't want the building to be lying empty mid-week and decided to open the Village Story-telling Centre in a bid to bring more people into the church.

They converted the vestry and one of the galleries of the church into dedicated storytelling areas with artwork by artist Kelvin Guy and specially commissioned modern stained-glass windows by Christian Shaw.

The centre has been a huge success, with primary school children coming in for two hours every morning to hear stories from around the world and older people using it in the afternoon for reminiscence sessions. Although the centre is in a Church of Scotland building Rachel Smillie, the director, has a policy of trying to promote religions and cultures from around the world.

People bounded off the buses full of enthusiasm for the places they've visited.

"Often the stories will be from another country, from Scotland, from the Christian faith or from other faiths," Rachel told the delegates on Friday. "The children then carry out a craft activity based on the story, a music activity – we have musical instrument from around the world – and finally a computer activity, which gives them the chance to learn more about the country or faith that we have been focusing on."

The centre opened around the time that the British government

first decided to place asylum seekers in Scotland and in particular in Glasgow. Right from the start it has attempted to use storytelling to help asylum seekers integrate into the local community as well as encourage locals to welcome people from all around the world, with different faiths and languages.

Story-telling as tool

"I chose this event for selfish reasons because I am just a huge fan of story-telling," said Megan Latimer from Atlanta who is at the World Assembly as a representative of US volunteering organisation Hands On. "The idea of using story-telling as a tool for community building and eliminating barriers of prejudice is really intriguing and fascinating."

"And I loved this visit. I didn't realise that there was a faith-based element to it before I came, so that's been really interesting. To see how this sort of initiative plays out in a faith-based context

Facing Up to the Politicians

and to see how it has developed really strong, inclusive partnerships is great.”

The Village is supported by charity Faith in Community Scotland, which aims to unite and provide support to organisations of different religious beliefs in their aim to tackle poverty in their local communities. Delegates were given a presentation about the work of the charities Transformation Team, who give practical advice to faith-groups about how to set up and manage projects like the Village.

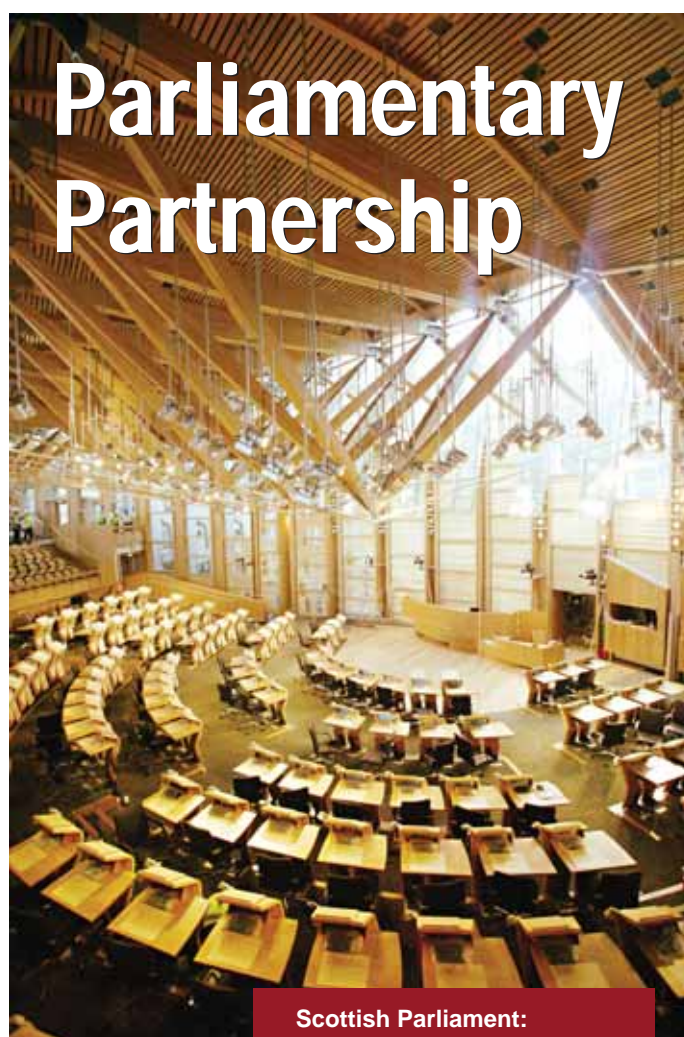
Emmanuel Morlai Conteh from Sierra Leone, said that this model is one that he would like to try to introduce in his own country, while Mae Chao, from UN volunteers, who is based in Germany said the visit was particularly useful because it highlighted the way that faith groups can contribute to regeneration.

“Truly inter-faith activities are very important for addressing the issues of poverty,” said Mae, “and I happen to agree that it’s the religious organisations that are most connected to the grass-roots and examples like this show what can be done when people put the poverty issue first and don’t get hung up on the religious issues.”

Sheila Fraser, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations development officer who organised the Learning Exchanges, said the feedback from the trips has been really positive. Speaking on Saturday, Sheila said: “I’ve had lots of people come up and personally thank me for the learning exchanges. People bounded off the buses full of enthusiasm for the places they’ve visited.

“We’ve learnt a lot about the types of things that delegates have enjoyed, so next year we’ll have the chance to pull together an even better programme of activity!”

► Susan Smith



Scottish Parliament:
Overbudget but beautiful

Over 60 delegates headed east to the Scottish parliament in Edinburgh, Scotland’s capital city, for the ‘civil society and participative democracy’ learning exchange.

In a welcome speech to delegates, Presiding Officer the Rt Hon George Reid MSP stressed the four key principles of power sharing, accountability, access and participation, and equal opportunities. Delegates were then greeted by a cross-party group of politicians over lunch before moving to a committee room for a panel session featuring Mary Robinson, Aruna Rao, Sir Clive Booth, Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, Linda Fabiani MSP and Jan Jakub Wygnanski.

Attendees heard short speeches from each panelist on their visions and hopes for participative democ-

racy covering a range of topics, including women’s participation in development, maintaining focus on outcomes rather than outputs, keeping an eye on the ‘big picture’ with regard to NGO activity and encouraging ethical business.

George Reid then opened the discussion to questions from the floor before Mary Robinson, Hon President of Oxfam International and Chair of the International Institute of Environment and Development, summed up the session. She called for a partnership approach to the next three years of CIVICUS world assemblies and proposed that each assembly should be seen as a unique learning opportunity and a strong base for dealing with the inevitable challenges that shifts in world economic and political power will present.

Openness

She also called for private businesses to work much more with local voluntary organizations and community groups rather than just with large NGOs.

Reflecting on the session, delegates were upbeat about the openness of the parliament in engaging people with the political process.

One of the delegates attending, Daniel Botha from Namibia said: “I’d like to investigate further and see how it works on the ground. Many NGOs are single issue and their advocacy is focused on their interests.

“The government chooses to support some of these interests as it relieves them of some responsibility in a way. I am genuinely impressed with the system of education on citizenship issues supported by the parliament.

“The openness of the institution – the fact that citizens can come in as they choose – is also very impressive.”

He also echoed Mary Robinson’s wish to see the World Assembly develop over the next three years.

“As this is the beginning of the three-year programme I would like to see the programme enhanced so there is more to the next three years than a talking shop. I’d like to see the partnership develop over the next three years.”

Government support for voluntary action was also praised by Liisa Part from Estonia. She said: “I’m very impressed with the way voluntary organizations are supported by the government with strong institutional frameworks.

“Many governments make declarations of support but here there is a strong base to do that. It seems a genuine partnership and it seems to be working well.”

However the level of civil society involvement in Scotland puzzled one delegate. Marit Otsing from Estonia said: “So good you can almost not believe it! 55,000 NGOs for five million people seems odd.”

► John Ferguson

Parting thoughts...



Civil Society Grapples With Relationship Problems

"It confronted its need to engage with elections-based action. There was growing recognition that civil society has a responsibility to strengthen itself but also needs to breathe new life into formal democracy."

More open to critics

The assembly also looked at strengthening relations between civil society and trade unions and other groups, Naidoo said. "Like government, we too tend to operate in our little silos."

Civil society groups recog-

nised they must be more open to critics as well.

"The key thing that has come up is the question of accountability and legitimacy," Julius Court from the London-based Overseas Development Institute (ODI), told Terraviva. "Civil society was the darling in the 1990s. But it has been challenged. It is now struggling to find solutions."

Civil society members took a hard look at their own legitimacy at the Glasgow meeting. "Legitimacy comes either from expertise or from representation," he said.

Civil society has at different places and times struggled with both.

Unlike government after its conferences, this one led to no grand five or ten point declaration.

Sharing experiences

Few tangible results emerge from such meetings, Court said. "The most important part of such meetings is the chance to share experiences and to learn. People from different civil society organisations talked to one another about what is working, what is not."

The assembly was particularly

a learning experience for Scottish civil society groups who turned up in strength, Court said. "And they listened not just to other groups from the North but to many from the South as well."

The North-South divide did surface all through the conference; it could hardly have been otherwise.

"That gap is very real," Aruna Rao, director of the group Gender at Work and Chair of the Civicus board told IPS/Terraviva. "You see it in terms of access to resources, the ability to set the agenda, prox-

imity to decision-makers.”

Norway provides the highest percentage of its gross national income for development assistance, she said, “but a lot of that funding goes through Norwegian companies and NGOs.”

But new movements of southern-based organisations are emerging, she said. “They are forming their own networks, and becoming increasingly vocal in terms of defining policy alternatives.”

Bridging the Gap

The world assembly this week did try to bridge the North-South gap, Rao said. “We do that in terms of who speaks at our plenaries, or in setting out the agenda at workshops.”

Contrary to general notions about the civil society as a bunch of vague do-gooders, vital questions about power and politics emerged at the conference.

The nature of civil society work is essentially political, Court said. “If you are doing on the ground what the government is not, that is a very political act.”

At the heart of all civil society effort is the effort towards change, and “every change is about power,” Rao said. “Civil society work is not about politics only in the sense that it is not about party politics.”

The conference brought also a new sense of the range of civil society, that covers also groups often branded ‘right-wing’ and ‘reactionary’, such as those that oppose reproductive health measures on religious grounds.

Fresh breeze

The conference brought some fresh democratic breeze into its style. A point made from the floor could be flashed on the screen in minutes, and all delegates could vote on it there and then.

And the conference brought none of the hierarchical notes that

Fringe Symbolism

The opening plenary, as the biggest of such meetings are called, ran into an unusual dilemma at the start of the world assembly of civil society organisations in Glasgow this week. It is a dilemma that in some sense stayed through the conference, and will last well beyond it.

It was the first meeting on political justice at the conference, called by the civil society group CIVICUS, and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO).

Not a lot of people turned up, to begin with.

And so the panel of speakers seated themselves on the front edge of the stage floor. The girl among from the United States looked comfortable there in her jeans, with her red shoes swinging at eye level before some delegates on the front row. A couple of other panelists in jacket and tie had clearly not expected this.

The seating arrangement ended with a protest. “Call me old-fashioned, but I do not like

this,” Amani Kandill, director of the Arab Network for NGOs, said as she was called to join the panel. The hall was beginning to fill up, so it might be better to move back to proper seats, said another. And so the panel retreated to more conventional seating on chairs on stage.

The change of seating raised some fundamental questions. The first had a fringe feel to it, the second was a more proper, mainstream like arrangement. The first reduced the difference in level between those speaking and those spoken to, the second smacked of usual official distance.

Where is civil society really situated? Is it informally close to people and therefore able to communicate in that tone? Or does it – the civil society of the North anyhow – seem as conventionally removed from people who need it most as the structures of government?

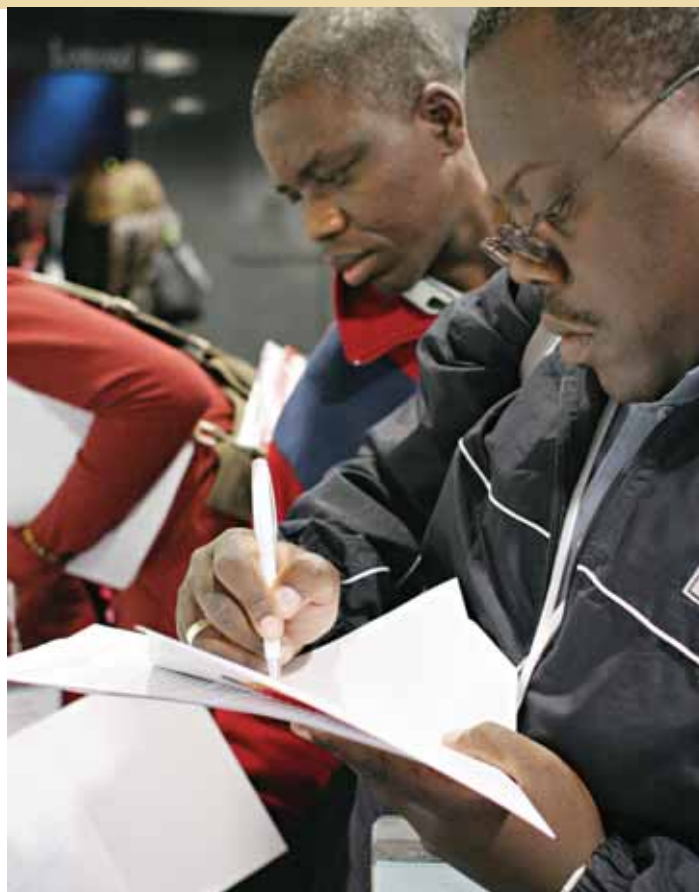
Or, is it none of the above?

creep into non-governmental organisations soon enough. More than most other conferences, this one gave practical shape to participation and free speech through the way it was set up, rather than through verbal tributes to the idea.

But this was no absolute model for all conferences to follow, either. The most glaring omission was the Glaswegians. This was about people, but almost no one from the city seemed to drop in to see what was going on. Which did raise a question: are civil society groups often talking to one another rather than to the people in whose name they speak.

And as ever, difficult notions about money came up: where money gets sourced, who channels it and to whom. But, at least, this all had begun to get talked about.

► Sanjay Suri



And the Winners and Losers are...

The vote was not surprising, but it was telling. Civil society members had asked them that rather difficult question: “Are political leaders listening to civil society?”

The verdict was not clear, because given the wide range of attendance at the CIVICUS World Assembly of civil society organisations, everyone was confronting all the world’s differences among both civil society and politicians.

The first vote was on the question whether politicians in the country of the voting members were indeed listening to them. The answer, an overwhelming No.

But, differences across regions showed up in the voting pattern. There was a lot more Yes in Europe and North America, and a lot more No in Asia Pacific, Africa and the Middle East, with Latin America somewhere in between.

New Strategies

And who do politicians listen to, more than to civil society? To big business, to foreign powers, to media. No surprises here either.

And what did civil society expect it could do? To voice its views, or to hope to influence policy and decisions? More than two-thirds thought it could hope to do no more than exercise the first of these options.

And so to the question that arose from all these. “If politi-

cians are not listening, what are our strategies to make them listen,” Aruna Rao, director of the group Gender at Work and Chair of the Civicus board, asked delegates.

It was time for some of the busiest in civil society to confront its weaknesses and to explore its strengths.

“We can lament that politicians are listening more to big business than to civil society, but why should they listen to us?” said Guy Ryder, general secretary of the International Confederation

of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), speaking from the panel.

“We believe that we have the right ideas and the right views, but we should not believe that we have legitimacy because we have good ideas. We have to win legitimacy in the marketplace of political ideas.”

Social Capital

That can happen, and has happened in all sorts of ways, Ryder said. In France, recently, trade unions teamed up with civil society to block legislation that

It is time for some of the busiest in civil society to confront its weaknesses and to explore its strengths. Civil society is by definition the custodian of social capital that political leaders rely on. It must exercise the power we have, even if it is not political authority.



Aruna Rao wants to open

denied young workers many rights, he said. “Trade unions mobilise better when they do so in partnership with civil society,” he said. “That kind of alliance should become a major part of trade union work.”

And that was one way to get politicians to listen, Ryder said. “They will listen to us if we work together, they will listen to us if we make that difference.”

Abiola Tilley-Gyado from Plan International in Nigeria said politicians do listen, “but the ones that listen most are the

ones not yet in power.” The opposition, she said, is in a sense civil society “because they are not yet state actors.”

But civil society has its own power that more politicians must listen to, she said. “We must recognise that civil society is by definition the custodian of social capital, what political leaders rely on. We must exercise the power we have, even if it is not political authority.”

But civil society must gain its own kind of legitimacy first, she said. “We must be self-critical, be prepared for a rigorous and robust review process amongst ourselves, be prepared for peer review amongst us.”

By Own Effort

And the “us” is a quite divided lot, she pointed out. “So many groups are dying for funds for reproductive health,” she said. “But they are being denied due to the ideological beliefs of some donors. And the people who are feeding those beliefs are a part of civil society. These governments are listening to people who are a part of us. So how can we better understand each other?”

So here government is listening to civil society, but not to the kind of civil society that would gather at a meeting like this organised by the group Civicus and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

Eventually politicians will listen if civil society finds strength enough. In Chile, said Peter Ackerman, chair of the International Centre on Non-violent Conflict, a movement against Augusto Pinochet grew after groups of people began to

protest by walking and driving at half their normal pace.

A delegate from Nepal spoke of what civil society has just achieved there. “Civil society has shown how legitimacy can be achieved by its own effort, not by the mercy of government,” he said. “People should look at the example of Nepal to see how civil society can play a better role.”

Confrontation Inevitable?

Politicians and civil society are also not always strictly separate worlds. “Politicians sometimes dominate civil society, so how can it then achieve legitimacy,” a delegate from Lebanon said. “So we have a lot of work to do in our own house, to ensure our legitimacy.”

Many members brought up again the idea that democracy is more than just that vote cast once every four or five years. But that must not mean a confrontation is inevitable with the politicians, said Ryder.

“Civil society is very constrained where there is no democracy,” Ryder said. “We should be the first to protect democratic choices.”

But some civil society confrontation with politicians will not go away. “Of course, who are we that they should listen to us,” a delegate said. “But who are they that we should listen to them?”

The government in Britain was elected by 37 percent of the voters, 17 million registered voters did not vote at all. So who will speak for the rest? Civil society? But who is agreed on that?

► Sanjay Suri

Civil Society and Media: An Uneasy Relationship

Politicians listen far too much to media, delegates said. But how, others said, if civil society strengthens its own media, an ‘alternative media’.

Because standard media often presents civil society as a fragmented group with its own hidden agenda, a delegate from Lebanon said. But while civil society sorts itself out, maybe it also needs supportive media of its own, said another.

“Community radio is one way of doing this,” a delegate who runs one such radio station in Ireland said. “We must develop our own voice; politicians do listen to media.”

Other spoke of the strengthening voice of child media. Groups of children armed with video cameras have been able to tell their stories in Africa, in India, and politicians

have often been forced to listen. “We have to help bring this to higher levels,” she said.

There is a further question, inevitably, of why politicians would want to listen to what is alternative media. But the voice of media considered ‘alternative’ is itself closer to the mainstream now than it ever was.

Inter Press Service (IPS), the news agency that is also producing the Terraviva newspaper, gets more than 25 million page views a month on its website, besides feeding more than a thousand publications and institutions. And mainstream newspapers around the world publish IPS reports.

Terraviva connects thousands of civil society members to one another. These voices are being heard and louder.



Farewell...



Was it a Success or Failure?

The Glasgow powwow could best be considered as another rung, major or minor, in the ever-growing ladder of civil society's involvement in the lives of citizens anywhere and everywhere

As we all bid farewell to CIVICUS World Assembly today, the inevitable question on the minds of many is likely to be: Was it a Success?

The question may be inappropriate.

It would be amiss to judge this and similar events in terms of success or failure. What is success? Attendance? That belongs to politicians counting crowds. Forceful resolutions? That is the forte – if not failure – of the UN and alikes. Length of applause? (Not too many are fooled by that anymore)

Maybe meetings of this nature and purpose should be less results oriented, lest they fall into the trap of judging themselves along “achievements” that mean so much to big business and governments –but are often chided

by civil society groups.

An African NGO meets a counterpart from Asia at the sprawling Exhibition Centre complex or anywhere in Glasgow and they fraternize, picking up tips on what can be done in Africa or Asia based on their experiences. How do you judge the meeting? In the plus column of a corporate balance sheet?

Leaving the success-failure equation to corporations and politicians, the Glasgow powwow could best be considered as another rung, major or minor, in the ever-growing ladder of civil society's involvement in the lives of citizens anywhere and everywhere.

Yes, NGOs and civil societies have come a long way baby! And they have a lot to go before they become what UN Secretary

General Kofi Annan calls “the next superpower.”

From Rome to Glasgow

Those who follow the steady growth of civil society groups will recall that during a World Food Conference in Rome in 1974, there was a call in response to the threat of mass hunger in South Asia, delegates made eloquent declarations inside the Palazzo dei Congressi – while at the same time munching on caviar canapés and sipping champagne inside.

Outside, sprawled on the steps on a chilly autumn night in Eternal City, was the American comedian Dick Gregory, protesting and waiting to be heard. He was thought to be a bit unbalanced – and even the media almost ignored him.

But he may have been one of the originators of what we now call NGOs or Civil Society groups.

Then, NGOs were not even allowed in intergovernmental meetings. They persisted, gaining not only admission, first as observers, eventually also as participants, and lately speaking ahead of delegations in some parleys.

And soon, if a way could be found, they may even get voting powers.

Here in Glasgow, participants are leaving with experiences and memories that cannot be put on balance sheets.

Process Counts

Yes, protests were lodged; anger vented against injustices in economy, social and human rights issues. They were to be expected, but they were not the main “accomplishments” of the Glasgow event.

The accomplishment lies in the process, not in results.

It's about “networking” since without it, you are on your own, prey in a jungle dominated by adversaries that love civil society groups only if they can silence or control them.

Back to success or failure.

“Yes, it was a success,” remarked Lord George Foulkes, chairman of the CIVICUS host committee. “We learned how to do it better next time.”

Adds Sylvia Borren, executive director of Oxfam Novib of The Netherlands: “A great deal was accomplished in small gatherings.”

Another accomplishment lied in the fact that The Weatherman kept his/her word in assuring cool, breezy weather on the longest days of the year, as this gathering will also go down in history as a smooth blend between the World Assembly and the World Soccer Cup.

Except that in football, there are clear winners and losers. It's a 90-minute struggle. Civil Society's is a continuing one.

► Hilmi Toros