

Reaching the 2030 Agenda through Collaboration with Global Civil Society

Abstract

With globalization, the international development agenda is now influenced, monitored and implemented by a wide array of actors, and not only by States. Civil Society Organizations are among them, and they are seen as the interlocutors between global civil society's demands and international fora. They have conquered unprecedented opportunities to voice their concerns, take part in decisions, and assist in their implementation. In this policy paper, I present recommendations on how the G20 can foster the inclusion of global civil society in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations.

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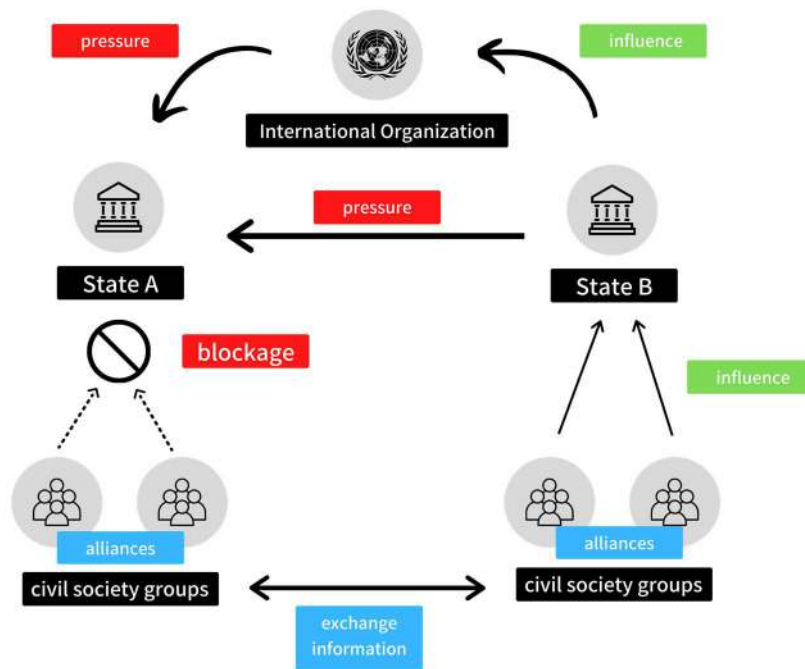
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Challenge

The emergence of globalization has noticeably impacted global governance. With highly dynamic and connected transportation and communication technologies, national social/environmental issues become easily transnational and states are encouraged to perceive their own challenges as a result of decisions taken by other states and also as a combination of micro and macro phenomena. Rosenau (1992, p.275) notes that, because of the "revolution in information technologies", citizens gave a new-found capacity to 'see' their role" in shaping and influencing public policy and international decisions.

This is also illustrated through Keck and Sikkink's "Boomerang Model" (KECK; SIKKINK, 1998 apud TARROW, 2005), where the following mechanism is found. Firstly, Civil Society Organizations are formed. In some instances, they are able to be in touch with and influence their states ("State B") and in other instances, their influence is blocked by their national governments or legal frameworks ("State A"). In all instances, they are able to share information with each other. As a result, they externalize their political pressure by referring to International Organizations (IOs), which then serve as an umbrella resource to combine civil society efforts and link them to national states worldwide. Such pressure also comes in the shape of the requirement to adopt the policies of international institutions. Implementation of such politics is then followed by those groups. Some states continue to resist them, while some adopt them and work in conjunction with the pressure groups (CSOs).

Figure: Boomerang Model



Source: Adapted by author from TAROW, 2005, p. 146.

For Kissling and Nanz (2008, p.3), organized civil society serves as a “transmission belt between a global citizenry and the institutions of global governance”. This “transmission belt” operates in two complementary ways: first, it gives a voice to citizens’ concerns and channels them into the deliberative process of international organizations; second, it makes the internal decision-making processes of international organizations more transparent. In order to fulfill these two roles, civil society organizations need to exercise a certain level of influence.

However, there is no consensus that the CSOs who participate in this process truly represent global civil society.

Even though the trends of global civil society participation in the international development agendas seem to be increasing, insights into the profile of civil society representatives still suggest that opportunities to engage with international organizations are unequally distributed.

At least five factors contribute to this inequality: geographic distribution, access to civic literacy, timing of engagement, access to conditions and degree of formality in the international discussions.

An evidence of the omissions in these aspects of engagement with civil society is seen on the TAP Network Survey on Strategic Priorities and Advocacy for the 2019 High Level Political Forums. In the survey report, it said “many [CSO members] highlighted that engagement mechanisms with civil society were not as inclusive they had hoped” (PARTNERSHIPS FOR TRANSPARENCY, 2019, p. 10).

As the G20 countries have been crucial to achieve the goals set in the 2030 Agenda, their efforts to increase collaboration with global civil society would play a major role to foster development in the next decade. Based on those factors, I present several

recommendations to increase the effectiveness of global civil society participation in the implementation of the SDGs.

Proposal

1. Reduce geographical asymmetries

On the geographical asymmetries, the Global North tends to be more represented than the Global South in international discussions. For instance, the CSOs present during the consultations of the UN Open Working Group for the creation of the 2030 Agenda, were mostly from the Global North (UN, 2015). This is not surprising, as the Global North has been dominantly represented in international negotiations since they became open to civil society participation. When studying transnational activism, Tarrow found it was “geographically unbalanced” (2005, p. 44). So did Mckeon, when he outlined the “problematic areas” of civil society participation in the United Nations agenda setting spaces and affirmed there was an “imbalance in participation among industrialized countries and developing countries CSOs” (2009, p. 159).

Policy Recommendation 1.1

Together, the 20 members of the Group represent “two-thirds of the world’s total population, 80-90 percent of the world’s gross product and economic growth” and “60 percent of the world’s poor” (Cooper and Thakur, 2013, p. 4). With that configuration, the G20 is capable of bridging the North-South divide. It has an incredible potential to shape international relations through the exchange of power, ideas and assets. It is not a group of war winners, but a group of countries that united based on the willingness to recover and grow together.

With that in mind, the G20 should increase its efforts to listen to their respective local civil society representatives and bring their inputs to States meetings. Through consultations with global civil society, feedback reports and collaborative proposals, the G20 can bring its discussions closer to where their effects are seen and felt. Using current technologies such as real-time collaborative documents and conference platforms, the G20 can reach more diverse groups and converse with them directly.

2. Increase access to civic literacy

Global civil society participation also varies in proportion to the population’s level of civic literacy. In other words, in countries where society has a high level of political engagement, people are more likely to constitute advocacy groups and associations that will become transnational. In countries where people have lower chances to participate in political decisions, civil society organizations will also be less represented in global forums (MILNER, 2003).

Policy Recommendation 2.1

The more G20 countries strengthen its democratic practices, the more their own proposals will truly represent their respective population in international fora. The Group should, therefore, constantly seek ways to reduce corruption levels, promote public participation in national decision-making mechanisms and collect input from local CSOs on the impact of policy decisions.

3. Promote continuous engagement and adjust engagement timing

The time when civil society is invited to participate in international discussions matters. If they are invited too long before or after intergovernmental negotiations, their input might have no effect on the final decisions. Similarly, if they are given limited time to speak during official meetings, and their contributions are only heard after state actors have spoken, they might not be valued either. In short, civil society representatives have a higher chance to be heard when consultations take place in a balanced manner during the meetings and in comparison, to the negotiation process as a whole (SÉNIT, 2019).

Policy Recommendation 3.1

ECOSOC has also stressed that it is important to provide early and informed dialogue opportunities with several stakeholders (PARTNERSHIPS FOR TRANSPARENCY, 2019). The G20 countries should create and promote multiple social accountability tools and continuous engagement opportunities, in order to enable better outcomes than a few interventions for a short period.

Policy Recommendation 3.2

It is also important to ensure a closed feedback loop. In other words, once consultations are made and changes are made as a result of these consultations, civil society should have the chance to monitor the results and suggest adaptations to improve them. Official data should be accessible for all actors interested in the decision-making process.

4. Access to conditions to attend consultative meetings

Access to conditions that allow civil society representatives to join the international discussions is relevant. Visiting the negotiations venue, such as the United Nations Headquarters in New York City or Geneva, is expensive and bureaucratic. Therefore, “the most influential participatory spaces are also the most exclusive ones” (SÉNIT, 2019, p. 15).

Policy Recommendation 4.1

As the G20 was created to reduce global inequalities and combine forces to prevent financial crises, its members are aware of how much access to financial conditions play a role in effective diplomacy and transnational activism. In response to that, the G20 should financially support their respective civil society representatives to join their meetings, speak at them, submit feedback on outcome documents and design collaborative solutions to implement the international agreements.

5. Meeting structure and degrees of formality

The influence of civil society representatives also varies according to the degrees of formality in participatory spaces. Due to the bureaucratic debate formats used by the United Nations, it can be difficult for civil society members to be heard in formal meetings. Therefore, they end up taking advantage of informal spaces by creating personal relationships with negotiators. In short, “the less formal a participatory space, the more influential civil society interventions” (SÉNIT, 2019, p. 16).

Policy Recommendation 5.1

The G20 countries should adapt its meetings structure to allow more room for civil society representatives to speak up for their concerns and priorities. It should create more spaces for

public engagement and consider civil society's inputs by including them in official reports and bringing them closer to the negotiations among States.

Concluding Remarks

The G20's relationship with global civil society must strengthen a larger commitment to international participatory democracy. As CSOs are a vital link between local needs and global decisions, they must be involved in negotiation processes. Otto (1996) suggests such involvement should go beyond a consultation and that CSOs should have an independent status in international decision-making. He also adds that the UN should encourage diverse UN-CSO relations, rather than control them, and that power and information should be dispersed rather than centralized. Noticeably, while advancements are clear, there is much to improve to ensure the international agenda will find a balance between listening to local voices and effectively including them in international negotiations.

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