

20th Informal Working Breakfast on the Post-2015 Development Agenda “Civil Society Participation: To what ends”

Hosted by the Bahá'í International Community and ATD Fourth World
29 October 2014

A diverse group of stakeholders¹ held a working breakfast to discuss key issues related to civil society participation and the Post-2015 sustainable development agenda. The following are highlights of the discussion:

Sustainable development goals

- The OWG process was a balance between an evidence-based process and political compromise.
- All SDGs are global in nature and will be implemented differently in each country; economic, social and environmental dimensions (3D) are incorporated into every goal; goals are closely interrelated and integrated.
- For the first time in human history, we are designing a global process, we are designing the future.
- We are talking about a profound transformation of society—a transformation that is happening in the context of power dynamics and economic competition. We cannot continue to sort out differences in terms of a zero-sum game. We will not achieve the SDGs in this way. A paradigm shift is needed.
- Aspirations and goals are not enough to motivate countries and to stimulate implementation. SDGs must be translated into opportunities. Goals must be translated into projects and plans, that's the only way they will be funded.
- We are learning what it means for the UN to be ‘fit for purpose.’ This is a very important transitional moment for the international community.
- We need coalitions and appropriate institutional mechanisms created to support implementation of the SDGs.

Involvement of civil society organizations

- CSOs must be innovative, relevant and critical.
- CSOs must ensure an integrated, universal and evidence-based SDG agenda. Don't mistake sound-bites for substance. We must be communicating effectively and substantively.
- The OWG process was the most inclusive and transparent process that the UN has undertaken. The most important contributions came from consultations with CSOs.
- Roles of CSOs: ensure governments' accountability; ensure comprehensiveness of issues being addressed; providing a perspective outside of political limitations; maintaining a level of ambition; contributing to implementation efforts and ensuring that no one is left behind.
- CSO-UN relationship is rooted in the UN Charter. We need a better way to represent the diversity of CSO voices. What we have now is an “imperfect union.”
- A number of questions have been raised regarding CSO engagement: Are they legitimate? On whose behalf do they speak? How can we make sure that less well-funded CSOs (e.g. from the South) will be represented? To whom are the CSOs accountable?
- Some CSOs feel they represent the peoples of the world.
- People are rising up and acting in their own agency; they are not as concerned about voices being heard as their needs being met. They are saying that the institutional set-up is broken at all levels.
- In which areas could CSOs push the envelope? In what areas are their contributions most needed?
- In some countries, ‘the state’ does not draw a distinction between the government and the people (e.g. “el estado” is all of us.)

¹ Permanent Missions: Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Panama, Singapore. Representatives from UN: Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, UN Non-Governmental Service, UN Conference on Trade and Development, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN Development Programme, UN Executive Office of the Secretary-General, UN Millennium Campaign, UN Women. Non-governmental organizations: Bahá'í International Community, Beyond 2015, Child Fund Alliance, Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, Global Policy Forum, Good Shepherd International Justice Peace Office, International Committee for October 17, International Movement ATD Fourth World, Loretto Community, Mercy International Association, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, Plan International, Salesian Missions, UNANIMA International, World Council of Peoples for the United Nations, World Vision International.

- Meaningful CSO engagement takes time—discussions over weeks and months.

Concerns and challenges

- Challenges with CSOs: some organizations have a ‘silo mentality’; transparency—must expect the same level of transparency from CSOs as we do from governments. CSOs must understand the integrated nature of the SDGs. ‘Silo-ization’ is not the same as specialization. Experts are needed who can think in context and who can work together to design a functioning system.
- Some governments are concerned that CSO participation will mark the end of the intergovernmental decision-making. Are governments just outsourcing responsibilities by consulting with CSOs?
- We need a new approach to measuring progress and gathering data; the old system is too taxing in terms of reporting requirements.
- None of the current national and international organizations have been created to meet three-dimensional goals; support mechanisms are needed in order to make organizational infrastructure ‘fit for purpose’
- How will the UN ‘manage’ the engagement of CSOs? What is the UN’s role vis-à-vis CSOs?
- The ‘high-level panel’ construct is outdated; perhaps the world does not need ‘eminent people’ to set the course and direction of development. Should the UN be setting up a high-level panel each time there is a global crisis?
- How is the SDG framework received by other inter-governmental institutions, e.g. IMF? How do other institutions see the SDGs?
- We must educate the member states that CSO participation has value for them.
- There may be a point at which Member States will close their meetings. If there is genuine goodwill from all sides, then any problem can be solved.