Keynote Address and Closing

Activity Format: Plenary

Number of participants: Men:  Women:  (Total: plenary room half full)

Time and date: September 12, 2011, 4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Presenters:
- Adam Kahane, Partner, Reos Partners, Canada

Programme track reports:
- Development Effectiveness: Roselynn Musa, African Women's Development & Communication Network (FEMNET) Climate
- Climate Justice: Kumi Naidoo, Executive Director, Greenpeace International
- Democratic Space: Konstantin Baranov, International Youth Human Rights Movement
- Technology: Paula Fray, Regional Director, IPS, Africa

Key presentation items

Adam Kahane invited the reporters on the thematic tracks to share their insights and thoughts with regards to the ideas, relationships, intentions and commitments that emerged from the sessions of their track.

Reporting on the development effectiveness track, Roselynn Musa noted that issues touched upon included the food and energy crises, and their effects of forcing greater numbers of people into poverty. (Confronted by growing disparities despite the Millennium Development Goals), people are increasingly questioning the motives behind donor countries’ development agendas. Discussions converged around preparations for the Busan Forum in November 2011, which is seen as a key moment to get donors (and civil society to sit at the same table). As development actors in their own right, civil society organizations have a vital role to play in seeking the kind of real change necessary to allow a better life for those living on the margins. The question of democratic ownership and the independence of aid agencies from donor governments emerged as key related issues; as it is strongly believed that local communities and civil society must have a say in the preparation of national development plans. At this point it becomes critical to create a facilitating environment for its voice to be heard.

Reporting on the democratic spaces track, Konstantin Baranov noted that a consensus emerging from several discussions pointed to the shrinking of civil society’s operating space within all countries. Preoccupied with defending these spaces, civil society groups have less opportunity to promote the issues and to solve the problems for which they exist. Mr. Baranov also spoke about the way in which the new challenges of the current period require a strong international dimension to their solutions. Civil society needs to
develop cross-border cooperation and work to make better use of currently weak international mechanisms; and governments should be lobbied to increase the strength and effectiveness of these mechanisms. In addition, it is important that civil society organizations work to mobilize broader publics and increase their awareness of current threats and challenges at the global level. In order to develop this capacity in the face of a dominant security discourse, civil society needs to establish its own effective counter-discourse. Finally, a strong emphasis must be maintained on protecting civil society activists and human rights defenders.

Reporting on the new technologies track, Paula Fray spoke of the recognition emerging from discussions of the ways in which these technologies are opening spaces for average citizens to involve themselves in processes, debates and issues. These new spaces challenge traditional views of civil society and civil society organizations (CSOs). Social media provides CSOs with the opportunity and challenge to link themselves up with new movements, and to develop new forms of collaboration. At the same time, she recalled that social media and new media are merely tools, and that they do not themselves create or lead revolutions. The challenge is to use these tools effectively to support the development of organizational capacity and partnerships. The continuing existence of the digital divide needs to be acknowledged; paradigms of exclusion can be countered by fostering access to low-cost technology. Likewise, it is important to remember that just as social media can support the work of civil society, it can also be used against it, as evidenced by reported instances of surveillance, harassment and intimidation. Finally, the need for an enabling framework was mentioned, which would help develop and share tools for greater transparency and access to information.

Reporting on the climate justice track, Kumi Naidoo emphasized that climate justice is first and foremost a human rights issue, and that it is imperative to develop a rights-base approach within this movement. At the present time, these connections are not being made, and civil society is not achieving the impact that it needs to have. Because of the pressing nature of climate change issues, an urgent paradigm shift is called for in global leadership. Mr. Naidoo argued that a more unified approach is needed, which would connect climate change to all of the challenges currently faced by humanity. The Arab spring offers a compelling lesson: struggles only move a cause forward, when decent men and women say enough is enough, and are willing to put themselves on the line. Recalling a comment made by CIVICUS’ Secretary General in the opening plenary, he asserted that wherein the collective choice is between coexistence and non-existence, the climate justice movement needs to convince ordinary citizens that enough is enough.

Mr. Naidoo argued that three changes need to take place within the movement in order for it to achieve this kind of reach: move towards adopting an inclusive language that can touch the hearts and minds of the masses; create spaces to reach out to and include faith-based organizations; and create opportunities for youth to lead the movement.

All of the reporters pointed out connections between the observations, ideas and concerns of the different tracks. These included:
- Rights as a common unifying thread between the different tracks
- The need for civil society organizations to switch from a defensive position to a proactive position
- The need to make increase the reach of civil society in global processes
- A reminder that, in order for civil society organizations to exercise real influence, they must invest in their ability to mobilize a broad, strong and effective citizen base
- The challenges and opportunities that new technologies offer

**Were diversity, equality or gender issues raised or tackled?**

Yes, gender rights and women’s inclusion were mentioned, as were the necessary intersectionalities between different issues and struggles

**Key lessons of the session**

In her closing words, Ingrid Srinath underscored the need for a renewed civil society engagement in politics. The biggest risk for civil society organizations at the present time is that they retreat from this challenge, that they be motivated by fear, and refuse to take risks. She upheld that the biggest lesson of the World Assembly is that civil society and its organizations need not be afraid.