

CIVICUS Conference Report

Established in 1993, CIVICUS is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) with members and partners in more than 100 countries. This organization is usually associated with the survey *Global Civil Society Index* currently conducted in 44 countries worldwide. CIVICUS has also earned its well-deserved reputation as the speaker of global civil society. Since 1995 CIVICUS has been organizing World Assemblies, which events have become a meeting point for delegates from global and local institutions alike. The key stakeholders of all CIVICUS World Assemblies are delegates from civil society organizations, donors, the media, the government, and the businesses.

The seventh CIVICUS World Assembly and the first CIVICUS Youth Assembly took place in Glasgow, UK from 23 till 27 of May 2007. Some 900 delegates from NGOs, universities, research institutes, representatives of government, business, media and donors coming from 138 countries took part in these events. Whereas the central theme of all CIVICUS assemblies has been *Acting Together for a Just World*, this year's Assembly organizing theme was *Accountability: Delivering Results*. During the five days of the Assembly more than fifty workshops took place, all of which addressed different aspects of accountability. Delegates could also take part in learning exchange programs hosted by NGOs operating in Glasgow and neighboring cities. And last but not least, the Scottish Voluntary Sector exhibition run simultaneously with the CIVICUS World Assembly, thus exposing Assembly participants to the chance to see and learn how Scottish civil society works.

Thus, during the five days of the Assembly civil society practitioners, researchers and activists could choose from a wide array of workshops to attend. These workshops provided an excellent platform for learning, but also of exchanging opinions and discussing issues relevant to civil society organizations worldwide. As this year's Assembly organizing theme suggests, CIVICUS focuses on the results-oriented aspects of accountability. This interpretation of accountability is indicative of the self-critical attitude of the NGO sector, but also of its genuine desire to make a difference in the respective fields of interest NGOs work on. Here are some examples of workshop topics presented during the Assembly: *Civil Society Accountability, Poor People Holding Service Providers to Account, Corporate Accountability, The Role NGOs Play in Making the United Nations Accountable, Media Accountability, Accountability of Global Institutions, Government Accountability: from Political Won't to Political Will, Accountability Within—the Engagement of Volunteer Social Activists, Our Accountabil-*

ity to Future Generations: Responding to the Challenge of Environmental Sustainability, and so on.

The participants in this Assembly came from different countries as well as different sectors thus guaranteeing the representation of various points of view regarding not only NGOs' accountability, but also other problems relevant to all socially-involved institutions. Delegates could compare and in some cases reconsider their opinions about some issues, like for instance the practices that go under the title of "volunteering" or the most successful strategies for approaching individual donor-makers in different cultural settings. For example, in Scotland as well as in other advanced industrial countries the practice of actually *paying* volunteers some remuneration, usually not exceeding the amount of unemployment benefits, has become tacitly accepted. Also, during one of the sessions it was argued that in the so-called "brick" countries (Brazil, Russia and China) private philanthropers in fact shun publicity, although for political and culture-specific reasons. This fact necessitates particular approach on behalf of NGOs addressing private donors in these countries. For example, it was argued that in Russia a successful strategy adopted by NGOs is to actually *excite* donors rather than pressure them over issues donors could support.

As far as the leading theme of this year's CIVICUS World Assembly is concerned, participants demonstrated critical attitude to the explanatory power and practical applicability of the concept of NGOs' accountability. They did not question the need to aspire after greater accountability of NGOs towards their donors, beneficiaries, volunteers, personnel and the society at large. The assembly participants rather attempted to agree on a common definition of accountability in order to be able to adequately *measure* the performance of different stakeholders in this field. The succinct conceptualization of accountability, which views it as "a means to bring in a broader range of voices to influence decision-making of all kinds"¹ was accepted by delegates as a working definition that adequately reflects the promise of accountability to guarantee greater inclusiveness in decision-making processes at all levels. Participants at one of the sessions at the Assembly also agreed that the more limited legal regulation for NGOs, the less accountable civil society. Case studies of state legal regulations from Venezuela, Israel, Uganda, India, China, Uzbekistan and Indonesia testified to this contention.

The CIVICUS World Assembly presented not only opportunities for delegates of NGOs to network and learn from each other, but also allowed donors to receive valuable feedback from organizations they support. Interestingly, whereas usually it is NGOs that take up the role of "social partners" during inter-governmental meetings, in this case it was institutions like the World Bank, the United Nations, the UK Lottery Fund and others, which were "guests" at this global civil society conference. During workshops institutional donors were usually faced with the problem to convince NGOs that the areas they finance indeed meet the most pressing social needs articulated by NGOs. Apparently, donors and donees haven't yet managed to work out a system of checks and balances, which would reflect both donors' desire to

¹ D. Bonbright and S. Batliwala 2007 *Answering for Ourselves: Accountability for Citizen Organizations*, downloadable from www.civicusassembly.org

effect change in prioritized areas and donees' first-hand knowledge about the needs of communities they represent as well as donees' competence in specialized problem areas. Nonetheless, initiatives like this Assembly provide platform for exchange of ideas and points of view, which could facilitate donors and donees partnership.

The CIVICUS Assembly also threw light on other types of diverging perspectives. For instance, delegates from East-Central Europe might have felt queer sensation whenever it came to categorizing countries. As it is well known, after the end of the Cold War global non-profit institutions and some researchers alike have tended to divide the world into North and South, or developed and developing countries. Apparently, countries like Poland and some other former communist countries don't fit into this scheme of things. This predicament also breeds practical problems, for example when deciding whether to support financially the civil society sector in countries considered neither-developed-nor-developing. The diverging opinions on some issues notwithstanding, Assembly delegates unanimously applauded George Papandreou, the president of Socialist Movement International. Papandreou cited an ancient Greek word, the derivative of which is the contemporary word "idiot." In ancient Greece this word meant "person not involved in public life." The Assembly's message could thus be summed up in the following way: take personal responsibility, act accountably.

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