

CIVICUS – A GLOBAL FORUM FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

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The 2001 World Assembly of CIVICUS, held in Vancouver in August, was attended by more than 400 delegates from 90 countries. Reflecting the designation of 2001 as the international year of the volunteer, the theme of the conference was “Putting people at the centre: voluntary action shaping social and economic change”.

BACKGROUND

CIVICUS, an international association of national and global foundations and non-government organisations (NGOs) dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world, was formed at a gathering in Mexico City in 1995. Victoria University of Wellington’s Institute of Policy Studies Programme on Civil Society (formerly the Voluntary Sector Programme) was a founding member of CIVICUS, and I was their representative in Mexico and at the subsequent world assemblies in Budapest, Manila and Vancouver. The Association of NGOs of Aotearoa (ANGOA) is now also a member of CIVICUS.

Underpinning all of CIVICUS’ activities is its vision that a healthy society is one in which there is an equitable relationship among citizens, their associations, foundations, business and governments, and that citizen action is a predominant feature of the political, economic and cultural life of all societies.

In addition to the bi-annual World Assemblies, CIVICUS has sponsored discussions and produced publications on legislation affecting community organisations, fund-raising strategies and community-business relations. A major current project is developing a civil society index that draws together into a single measure four elements of community associations – the space in which they operate, their structure, their impact on society and their underlying values. The index has been tested in a pilot study in ten countries: New Zealand, Canada, Croatia, Romania, Belarus, Ukraine, Mexico, Uruguay, South Africa and Pakistan.

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THEMES OF THE FOURTH WORLD ASSEMBLY

Two major issues ran through the conference presentations and discussions: building positive relations between government and community organisations, and how to reach out to the disadvantaged and excluded. In relation to CIVICUS itself, the subtext concerned ways in which a global association could bring people with disabilities, indigenous people and informal community associations into its discussions. In other words, could CIVICUS move beyond being a grouping of national and global foundations and NGOs?

The civil society index project was a centrepiece of the conference, with an interactive plenary session and a workshop to present the initial findings from the pilot phase. All those involved in the pilot felt that it was a worthwhile and useful exercise; that the attempt to produce a rounded picture of civil society, reflecting more than the usual counting of organisations and volunteers, was critical. However, there was a universal lack of good quality data and some concern that the alternatives used in the pilot – stakeholder surveys and workshops – required more work to make them effective.

The presentations from several countries discussed the “political” value of the exercise in providing an opportunity to bring into the open deep-felt concerns over the nature of civil society and the relationship with government. Questions arose concerning whose values are reflected in civil society, whether diversity is accepted (especially in Central and Eastern Europe), and the position of disadvantaged groups. These issues led to a suggestion that the index might be used effectively to consider the nature of specific groups *within* a society, rather than as a comparative tool between societies. The New Zealand delegates were very active in all of these areas – reflecting our current interest in these issues from both a community and a government perspective.

Tu Williams, representing the Māori Congress, spoke on a panel on social exclusion and co-facilitated a workshop with me about “Cultural Perspectives on Voluntary Activity”. Pat Hanley from ANGOA joined us in presenting the New Zealand report on the civil society index. I also reviewed the findings of the community government working party on a panel about “Civil Society and the State: Towards a New Partnership”, together with presenters from Croatia, Estonia, Canada and the United Kingdom.

As well as this panel, there were several other sessions on the changing nature of relations between the community sector and government. The apparent success of the process in the United Kingdom of developing compacts between the community sector and the regional governments (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), as well as with Westminster, has led community groups in a number of countries to seek similar formal agreements. This was particularly evident in the case of Central and Eastern Europe.

The issue presented from Croatia and Estonia was that they were looking for acknowledgement of their right to exist as genuine “players”, free of government control but with government “respect”. There was a feeling that this could only be achieved through a formal protocol, almost a treaty, between community and government.

In contrast, Stuart Etherington from the United Kingdom warned against becoming too closely bound to government. Some large national NGOs in the United Kingdom were seeking recognition of their right to participate as partners with central and local government. This meant sharing the funds made available by the taxpayers for a wide range of social services. This development, marked by the compacts, has opened a gap between these national community organisations and local community groups (and the advocacy groups) that are more concerned with maintaining their independence and separateness from government.

In New Zealand, there are competing claims on the table. One is similar to that in the United Kingdom, which could be described as a claim for a share of the taxpayer’s funding. Alongside this is a more abstract search for recognition of their legitimacy as a core component of New Zealand society.

However, the approach from the community in New Zealand was to build a relationship with government rather than focusing on a formal contract. This was seen in Vancouver as a positive and progressive position, which required more consideration.

The issue of how to move beyond a gathering of national and global NGOs, to include community associations and even citizens as citizens (that is journalists, architects, artists, etc.) is more problematic. How can community associations, local community groups, etc. play an active part in global associations such as CIVICUS? There was pressure from some members and funders for CIVICUS to stand alongside official global organisations such as the United Nations. This has led to a line of thinking that emphasises “representation” of countries by major NGOs or national coordinating bodies. This runs counter to the whole concept of citizen participation (in terms of independent, freely associating groups of individuals), which CIVICUS was established to promote.

Those participants, citizens in this sense, were more concerned with having a voice than being seen as representatives of a country or sector. There was interest in developing ways of moving beyond the global and national organisations, the NGOs (defined by being **non**-government but in some cases indistinguishable in form and structure from large government agencies), and to include those groups that are defined in a positive sense through their relationship with the community –

community associations that provide an opportunity for citizens to be involved in the life of their societies.

CIVICUS has recently decided not to promote or finance regional groupings. If members in a region wish to set up such a group then this is their choice and responsibility. This has been done by CIVICUS Europe with a director based in Hungary and committee members from the UK, Austria, Russia, Croatia, Sweden, Italy, Slovakia and Bulgaria.

Discussions among the Asia-Pacific group indicated strong support for building a similar group in our region. However, it was stressed that there should not be an automatic meeting in the years between the bi-annual CIVICUS conferences as happened with a previous CIVICUS-sponsored (and CIVICUS-funded) group. Other existing bodies in the region such as the Asia Pacific Civil Society Forum (based in Seoul) and the Asia Pacific Philanthropy Forum (based in Manila) should be contacted to see whether one of them could provide the administration for this regional role.

Two additional reasons for a regional group were suggested apart from sharing information and organising regional meetings. At the global level attention is diverted from the importance of involving the smaller countries of the Pacific and the more isolated countries of Asia, such as Myanmar and Laos. A regional grouping could direct its attention to this issue.

A regional association could provide a practical way of tackling the issue of how to involve community associations as well as large national NGOs and foundations. Existing gaps in citizen involvement, both in terms of countries and in terms of disadvantaged or uninvolved groups, become more apparent and a response more urgent at this regional level.

The global involvement and intensity of discussion at the CIVICUS conferences is a good indicator of the widespread interest in moving beyond a view of the world as being made up of a collection of nation states with treaties, accords and global coordinating bodies. Recent events in the United States confirm the urgency of building networks between citizens as people of the world and providing forums for them to meet, discuss and develop ways of living and working together.