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Civil Society Organizations: Time for Systemic Strategies

MYRIAD CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOs) are addressing the full range of environmental and social problems, including climate change, food insecurity, droughts, resource scarcity and poverty. Despite many successes, these perilous problems (and more) constitute a sustainability crisis that calls into question the efficacy of current CSO strategies. More transformative approaches, drawing on cutting-edge theory and practice, are required for CSOs to fulfill their role of helping humanity meet contemporary challenges. The Great Transition scenario offers a holistic framework for changing course.

GTI PERSPECTIVES ON CRITICAL ISSUES

The *Great Transition Initiative* is an international group working for a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being. With this long-term goal as our frame of reference, GTI Perspectives assess pressing near-term policy questions.

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The Need for a Course Correction

As economic development improves the material conditions of millions, the earth's capacity to supply resources and absorb waste is being exceeded. The resource-intensive lifestyles of a growing global consumer class intensify pressure on the planet's ecosystems, with greatest impact on the poorest, most vulnerable communities. All the while increasing inequality and eco-system degradation are driving the human-ecological system toward deepening crisis.

Local solutions are often unavailable when the causes of climate change, biodiversity loss and other problems are far removed geographically and the effects fall most heavily upon future generations. Conventional, linear approaches to addressing such issues tend to fail because of complex feedback loops with "rebound effects" that can convert initially positive results into later, negative impacts. Issues are interlinked: a response to one problem can lead to a different problem, for example, the adoption of intensive agriculture to address food scarcity leading to soil degradation and greenhouse gas emissions.

A systemic perspective leads us to ask whether dominant global actors, including civil society organizations (CSOs)¹, are responding in a manner commensurate with the holistic character of the sustainability challenge. The dominant paradigms bind the actions of governments, business, individuals and other social actors, constraining them from developing effective responses to the crises they confront. Governments are reluctant to act, caught between the need for tough remedial action and the short-term imperatives of the prevailing economic paradigm. Businesses, due to the nature of financial markets and the pressure to grow shareholder value, are limited in their actions. Individual consumers' behavior and motivations are deeply entrenched in social norms and constrained by economic frameworks, and even when transcending their roles as consumers can have little individual impact on the underlying dynamics driving crises.

The other social actors with the potential to tackle global problems are civil society organizations. With their mission of serving society's interests, CSOs have made a positive difference. Moreover, CSOs are seen as the most trusted social actors. A poll of nearly 5,000 people in 22 countries found that non-governmental organizations command trust among 62 percent of the public, more than business, government or the media.² Although they have the capacity and mandate to be an important force in confronting intertwined global challenges, in the face of worsening environmental and social trends, many CSOs are recognizing that their current strategies may not be up to the systemic task. A recent survey of CSO leaders suggests some core reasons.³

First, most mainstream CSOs tend to pragmatically focus on short-term incremental change. Second, as a direct consequence, much CSO work focuses on national and international advocacy, within a business-as-usual-political context that prevents far-reaching societal change. The failure of the Copenhagen summit on climate change in 2009 demonstrated the fallacy that the global political system could take strong action based on scientific rationality alone. Third, most mainstream CSOs focus on single issues, a structural separation that masks cross-cutting connections and undermines effective collaborations.

With the planet hitting biophysical limits and economic growth failing to trickle down to the poor, it becomes clear that an issue-by-issue approach within conventional

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development values and institutional structures cannot take us to the alternative path of sustainable and equitable development. The transition to an alternate mode of development will require broad and deep change across every realm: technology, legislation, economic and governance institutions, social relations, culture and values. Therefore, CSO strategies must emphasize that incremental change will be insufficient and, indeed, might even undermine the possibility of transformative change.

Leveraging CSOs' Full Potential

If the narrow policy approach has failed to galvanize enough public support to drive the political will for more radical government action, CSOs need to fundamentally recast their strategies to play a vital role in enabling such an encompassing movement. This will require CSOs to embrace a broad, unifying vision for a sustainable future and actions that address root causes – human values, lifestyles and economic structures – rather than the symptoms. On that basis, CSOs need to rethink and redesign the ways they work and try to influence the political, social and human systems towards sustainability.

1. A new vision: Although we cannot (and should not) embrace a single vision for a sustainable future, the more CSOs are able to align on core values and broad principles, the more they will, as a group, become effective change agents. The Great Transition delineates the contours of a sustainable global economy and society, and pathways to get there.⁴ It is a reminder that the structures of the current economic system are not set in stone; they can and must change to seriously address global crises. The Great Transition has the potential to align a very diverse range of CSO sectors, such as developmental and environmental NGOs, community groups, faith-based organizations, and trade unions, under one unifying framework, thereby providing a new source of collective strength.

2. Embedding systems thinking in CSO practice: Adequately addressing daunting global problems, like climate change, requires understanding the complex feedback loops within the wider system of which they are a part. Since neither traditional issue by issue approaches or linear cause-effect analysis are adequate, deep systemic change is needed to tackle interconnected sustainability issues. It is therefore essential for success that CSOs embrace systems thinking as the basis for understanding the world and creating viable strategies. A variety of tools and frameworks are available to CSOs for helping them to examine system structures and act systemically, such as organizational learning processes, individual capacity building, and programs to strengthen leadership.

3. Developing a new narrative: Recognition that a sustainable economy must radically reduce its material throughput is in tension with the dominant materialistic and individualistic values that form the basis of today's unsustainable consumption patterns. However, many current CSO strategies appeal to these dominant values (e.g., through the use of green marketing approaches) with the danger of reinforcing them. CSOs need to become more aware of the important long-term trade-offs of these pragmatic approaches and ultimately align their strategies to emergent sustainability values. Indeed, CSOs can nurture a shift in cultural values by fostering collaboration across the range of different constituencies embodying values of community, affiliation and resilience. Such coalescences can advance a narrative and practice consistent with the principles of a Great Transition: the wellbeing of society, global empathy and reverence for the web of life.

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Mainstream policy discourse opens many windows for CSOs acting together to have an indirect impact on values. Perhaps the most striking example is the current debate in many countries on introducing beyond-GDP indicators (e.g., France, Germany, Austria, and the UK). Since national governments increasingly acknowledge that excessive focus on GDP growth hurts rather than helps society and the environment, CSOs should create large cross-sector alliances to push these governments to take the big step from talk to implementation of new indicators that make well-being and environmental sustainability the key measures of successful development. This would create the important change in the national narrative from a fixation on “economic growth” to attention to the many dimensions of “societal well-being”.

This deep shift in worldview requires overcoming the nature-culture divide by understanding humanity as a part of the environment and nurturing the design of institutions matched to the imperative of our increasingly interdependent world. To be effective, the new narrative must inspire and engage, offering a positive long term societal vision based on equality and well-being, rather than consumer-based growth. In exploring new cultural values and fresh approaches, CSOs face the challenge of moving beyond the status quo. The Great Transition offers a framework for CSOs to collaboratively transform their “special interests” and narrow policy focus through the co-creation of a narrative aligning different social sectors under an umbrella of common values and principles. This new narrative must speak to the hearts and minds of a very large number of people through a creative compelling story of who we are and where we want to go.

4. Supporting the seeds of the new system: A shift toward a Great Transition future will require complex learning processes and fundamental innovations. Due to their narrow and short-term focus, national politics, international negotiations and mainstream businesses cannot alone deliver this fundamental change of direction. Therefore, CSOs should get more actively involved in catalyzing bottom-up innovation initiatives as well as supporting and linking change agents who otherwise remain isolated in their communities and organizations. For example, larger environmental and development NGOs could support and partner with bottom-up initiatives, working to link change agents who otherwise would remain isolated in their communities and organizations, thus helping to cross-fertilize solutions and build movement connectivity. Initiatives that cultivate the seeds of the new economy and society can be found at all levels: community, city, industry, and government. They promote change by developing new institutions and challenging entrenched attitudes.⁵ New models of production, consumption, organization, ownership, and governance developed through bottom-up innovation rooted in local traditions and resources is a key element in the story of a Great Transition.

5. Supporting a new global movement: In the decades following the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, strengthening of grassroots political movements has played a subordinate role to policy advocacy and partnership with governmental agencies and business.⁶ Yet, during a time of deepening crises, a Great Transition can only succeed with the awakening of a new social actor: a vast and coherent movement of global citizens is the critical historical agent now missing from the global stage. A global citizens movement (GCM) engaging masses of people, “nurturing values of human solidarity, ecological resilience and quality of life” would “embrace diverse perspectives and existing movements as separate expressions of a common project”.⁷

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Despite the need for synergy, the potential among existing movements is severely limited by current political realities. Social movements seeking to ally in the global justice movement, including indigenous, feminist, labor, peasant, human rights, environmental and socialist formations, have difficulty moving beyond protest to articulate a common proactive agenda. Issues, priorities and even goals often conflict. For their part, CSOs have increasingly been transformed from participatory, democratic and grassroots forms into professional, oligarchic, and non-participatory “Astroturf” organizations. This needs to change.

Because it is unlikely that a GCM will spontaneously emerge through bottom-up self-organization, CSOs can play a pivotal role on various fronts to help facilitate its birth and development. In order for such a movement to crystallize, civil society must rise above the current “politics of opposition” and develop new models of leadership and collaboration. Taking the movement to scale may not depend on convincing masses from the beginning, but instead, on establishing and nurturing critical connections. These connections would act as springs of new knowledge and communities of practice.

For example, The Widening Circle campaign to advance a global citizens movement anticipates a phased process of organizational development, beginning with a relatively small group of committed people, supported by loose networks of individuals and organizations.⁸ CSOs can support the expansion of these kinds of initiatives by providing their resources and expertise. Additionally, large CSO networks can use the combined power and trust to inspire their members and broader range of citizens towards a GCM. The messages of small, dedicated, thoughtful formations can be strengthened with the support of large CSO networks.

6. Engaging funders in systemic CSO strategies: CSOs will require funding to effectively shift toward systemic strategies. This is a major challenge, since one of the main causes of CSO fragmentation is that “the interests of donors and the dynamics of professional organizations tend to favour a narrow issue oriented approach to work, encouraging NGOs to specialize in delineated niches (or “issue silos”).⁹ Therefore, CSOs will need to work with change agents in the funding community and bring the case for a more comprehensive strategy to funders. Such a shift will require adapting monitoring and evaluation schemes to align with the requirements of strategies for systemic change, which tend to be longer term and more uncertain than conventional projects. In addition to efforts to broaden the perspectives and adjust the priorities of traditional sources, alternative sources of support, such as crowd-funding¹⁰, might gain more prominence.

A Way Forward: The Smart CSOs Initiative

We have argued that CSOs can play a vital role in realizing the potential of a Great Transition. To pursue this objective, a new initiative – The Smart CSOs Initiative – has been launched by a group of CSO leaders and researchers. They are working across disciplines in a community of practice to build effective CSO strategies for advancing a Great Transition. The initiative will support CSO leaders and change agents in the development of cohesive strategies for CSO campaigns and projects. It will develop and test capacity building programs that support staff to enable these new strategies. It will also catalyze critical research on how CSOs can more effectively influence the social and political systems towards a Great Transition.

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Smart CSOs will encourage CSOs to move beyond piecemeal and fragmentary responses to developing strategies that align with a social and economic Great Transition. Ultimately the aim is to change the course of CSO strategies to contribute to mobilizing a global movement and generating massive political will for deep change. Is it possible to achieve this shift within the closing window of time available? History suggests that at critical moments, cultural values can shift relatively rapidly. In truth, though, we do not know what can be achieved if CSOs across the board start now to work with self-conscious purpose on influencing cultural values and promoting a new global paradigm. The size and influence of the CSO sector in many countries gives hope that, with such a program, something significant could be achieved.

Recasting of CSO strategies for the pressing imperatives of our moment is driven by a wider dynamic of transformation, and in turn will shape the outcome of that transformation.

Endnotes

- 1 This paper focuses on large, professional environment and development CSOs
- 2 2010 Edelman Trust Barometer: An Annual Global Opinion Leaders Study (<http://www.edelman.com/trust/2010/>).
- 3 The survey was conducted by means of in-depth interviews of a select group of 22 representatives from CSOs and research organizations (conducted by author as part of the Action Town Project).
- 4 P. Raskin et al. *Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead*. Boston, MA: Tellus Institute, 2002 (http://www.gtinitiative.org/documents/Great_Transitions.pdf).
- 5 C. Leggewie and H. Welzer. “Another Great Transformation?,” *Social and Cultural Consequences of Climate Change*. Journal of Renewable and Sustainable Energy, 2(3), 2010.
- 6 J. Speth. *The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and the Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008.
- 7 P. Raskin. “Planetary Praxis” in *The Coming Transformation: Values to Sustain Human and Natural Communities* by S. Kellert and G. Speth, Eds. New Haven: Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, 2010.
- 8 P. Raskin. “Imagine All the People: Advancing a global citizens movement.” GTI Perspectives on Critical Issues. Boston, MA: Tellus Institute, 2010 (http://www.gtinitiative.org/documents/IssuePerspectives/GTI-Perspectives-Imagine_All_the_People.pdf).
- 9 O. Kriegman. “Dawn of the Cosmopolitan: The Hope of a Global Citizens Movement.” GTI Paper Series. Boston, MA: Tellus Institute, 2006 (<http://www.gtinitiative.org/documents/PDFINALS/15Movements.pdf>). See also www.wideningcircle.org.
- 10 “Crowd-funding” describes the collective cooperation, attention and trust of people who pool their money and other resources, usually via the Internet, to support efforts initiated by others.

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This Perspective was written by Michael Narberhaus of WWF-UK, with Orion Kriegman, Pamela Pezzati, and Paul Raskin, based on the background paper for the March 2011 Smart CSOs Conference in London. The conference gave rise to the [Smart CSOs Initiative](#), which Narberhaus leads.

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