

8. The G7/G8 and Civil Society

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Hello, I am Professor Peter Hajnal of the Munk Centre for International Studies at the University of Toronto. In this session, I discuss the evolving relationship of the G7/G8 and civil society.

One of the most significant phenomena of international life has been the proliferation of **nongovernmental organizations** (NGOs) and other **civil society organizations** (CSOs) and coalitions since World War Two and especially since the end of the cold war. NGOs have extended their concerns and activities into every field, ranging from development, human rights, humanitarian action, the environment, to peace and security, and science and technology, to give just a partial list. NGOs have not only increased in number and scope; their role and influence have steadily become greater, too. One of the main factors behind the increasing influence of NGOs has been their efficient use of information technology and of the news media (Becker 1984).

Many civil society organizations have established links with international governmental organizations. The United Nations, for example, has had formalized consultative relationships with a large number of NGOs since its founding. Other **international organizations**, too, have had more or less regular, structured relationships, with a certain number of NGOs relevant to the interests of the particular international bodies.

By contrast, the G7/G8 is a flexible and generally non-bureaucratic institution, so it is not surprising that its relations with civil society groups are characterized by informal practice. In the next part of my lecture I will take a brief look at the history of G7/G8 interaction with civil society.

A. A Brief History of Civil Society–G7/G8 Relations

I would divide the history of civil society and G7/G8 relations into three phases. The first phase started at the inception of the G7 in 1975 and lasted until about 1983. During this phase, civil society and the G7 hardly took notice of each other. This was mutual non-recognition: civil society groups did not seem to hit the consciousness of the G7 leaders and the larger G7 system. And NGOs and broader civil society by and large did not recognize the power and importance of the G7, although they were, of course, conscious of the power of individual G7 countries.

Phase two lasted about ten years, from 1984 to 1994. During this time, the G7 agenda expanded to include many issues beyond the early focus on macroeconomic policy co-ordination. Civil society began to see the G7 as a legitimate target both for lobbying (on the positive side) and opposing (on the negative side). This is understandable because many of these new issues were of great concern to a wide variety of NGOs. Besides, it was becoming common knowledge that the G7 was indeed a powerful group and that it had become a major global institution. Initial civil society reaction to the G7 tended to be rather undifferentiated as to issue areas. The main manifestation of it was The Other Economic Summit or TOES. The first TOES was organized by the London-based TOES/UK, known later as the New Economics Foundation. It took place alongside the 1984 London G7 Summit. For the next several years, TOES sent delegations to the G7 summits; then, since 1988, TOES has met in a parallel event. Generally, TOES was a civil society coalition with varying NGO membership. It met in the G7/G8 Summit city and ran workshops and demonstra-

tions. In recent years, however, the importance of TOES declined. What took its place has tended to be a more focused, issue-oriented approach to the G7 and later to the G8. An early example of issue-specific civil society activity was the 1991 "Enviro-Summit," which met in London at the same time as the G7 London Summit.

Phase Three began in 1995, when the G7, on its part, first recognized civil society. It was at the Halifax Summit that year that the terms "civil society" and "NGO" were first used in official G7 documents. This was in the context of promoting sustainable development and the reform of international financial institutions. The Halifax communiqué stated that the United Nations and the **Bretton Woods institutions** should work for **transparency** and public accountability, a stable rule of law, and an active civil society. Subsequent G7/G8 Summits have acknowledged — at least in their official documents — the increasingly important role of civil society in environmental issues, democratic governance and poverty reduction, to mention just a few sectors. More recently, the 1999 Cologne Summit called on all stakeholders (governments, international organizations, business and civil society) to work together to realize the full potential of globalization for all. In addition to the annual Summits, other levels of G7/G8 system (notably, various ministerial meetings) took note of the civil society nexus.

B. Birmingham, Cologne, Okinawa and Genoa

The 1998 Birmingham Summit was a watershed in G7/G8 interaction with civil society. It was there that the Jubilee 2000 coalition lobbied for debt relief and organized a spectacular human chain of 70,000 peaceful demonstrators who surrounded the Summit site and presented a petition asking for debt cancellation to the leaders (Hathaway 2000). The host leader, British prime minister Tony Blair, responded on behalf of the G8 in a separate Summit document, and then paid tribute to

the Jubilee 2000 campaign for making such a persuasive case. Jubilee and its successor organizations have been supported by celebrities ranging from the Irish rock star Bono of U2 and former boxing champion Muhammad Ali to Pope John Paul II, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

In the lead-up to the 2001 Okinawa Summit, the Japanese host government appointed a director general for civil society participation. This official was in regular contact with a number of civil society groups. Japan also sponsored or hosted several pre-Summit events involving civil society, for example, an international symposium on the role of NGOs in conflict prevention. Moreover, the host government established an NGO centre for the duration of the Summit, providing meeting, work and technical facilities. There was a dialogue between the Japanese government and civil society leaders, both in Europe prior to the Summit and in Japan, although civil society considered the level of dialogue inferior to that achieved in Birmingham.

The trend of largely peaceful demonstrations continued before and during the 1999 Cologne and 2000 Okinawa Summits. But demonstrations and street theatre are just one aspect of civil society action, although this is what tends to garner most media attention. Year-round lobbying and advocacy, as well as preparing and disseminating policy papers, are among other facets of serious work by NGOs and other civil society groups. In the course of such activities, NGOs often consult governments, international organizations, academic experts, businesses and other stakeholders. In many cases, this type of action has allowed civil society to make a real impact on official policy: the Landmine Banning Treaty and the International Criminal Court are two notable examples. A very important factor in the increasing influence of civil society, as mentioned before, has been its effective and sophisticated use of information and communication technologies, especially the Internet.

For the 2001 Genoa Summit, NGO concerns ranged across a whole spectrum of issues, from the environment through women's rights to debt, health and education. Prior to the Summit, responsible civil society groups had made clear their intention to demonstrate and protest peacefully against economic globalization and for more progress on debt relief. They expressed concern that anarchists and other potentially disruptive or violent groups would jeopardize peaceful democratic protest. In the event, Genoa was marred by serious violence, as well as instances of police brutality. A young Italian anarchist lost his life there.

Civil society passed a rather negative verdict on the Genoa Summit. It gave mixed reviews to the **Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria** endorsed by the leaders, and it regretted what it considered the G8's failure to resolve the debt crisis. But it had a slightly more positive take on education.

C. Kananaskis

The three main themes projected for the 2002 Kananaskis Summit (the **New Partnership for Africa's Development** or NEPAD, sustained growth and terrorism) lend themselves to meaningful civil society participation. The Canadian host government has made a number of steps to further this aim. Under the leadership of sherpa Robert Fowler, a series of extensive consultations with citizen groups has been conducted. In addition, the government has made real efforts to educate the public at all levels about the G7/G8 and its role. The government has also launched an impressive website dedicated to the Summit, and has provided generous funding for the 2002 People's Summit, to be convened at the University of Calgary. While praiseworthy, these efforts do not yet appear to match the British government's fruitful consultations with civil society at the time of the Birmingham Summit (which many civil society groups consider the best consultations so far) or the in-depth discussions (involving think tanks as well as a

number of civil society groups) conducted by the Italian government prior to the Genoa Summit; nor do the Canadian government preparations to date include the kind of support provided by the Japanese government for the Okinawa Summit (such as the establishment of a NGO centre near the Summit site).

We know from the record of civil society activism that while government initiatives toward **nonstate actors** is important, civil society does not take its clues from government, and does develop strategies on its own terms rather than on the government's. There have already been many NGO meetings and other preparations for Kananaskis. Online activism has been evident, as shown by several websites, such as the G8 Activism website, the site of Partnership Africa Canada, As we move closer to the Kananaskis Summit, such websites can be expected to proliferate. Established websites of major international NGOs and coalitions are also likely to pick up coverage of G8-related campaigns and other activities.

Let us hope that the spirit of partnership, dialogue and peaceful protest will prevail, so that crucial issues of our time can be advanced at the Kananaskis Summit.

D. Conclusions

What lessons can be learned from this brief examination of the G7/G8-civil society interaction? First, civil society has become an important and powerful actor in its relationship with the G7/G8 system. At its best, civil society gives voice to the plight and aspirations of those who have become marginalized, and it fights for the universal extension of the benefits of globalization.

Second, it is important to distinguish the responsible majority from the small violent minority that has made its presence felt at major international gatherings ever since the 1999 "Battle of Seattle." Serious civil society organizations must isolate and prevent violent groups from sabotaging democratic rights, peaceful demonstrations and legitimate

programs. This becomes especially important after the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Third, unlike the regular, formal arrangements with civil society in the UN system, the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)**, and other structured international organizations, civil society relations with the G7/G8 are necessarily informal. There is mutual recognition of the need for dialogue and partnership among these actors, along with tensions resulting from differing and at times conflicting objectives, strategies and tactics. How can the G7/G8 bring major, responsible NGOs and civil society coalitions into some sort of association? My colleague Professor John Kirton has recently proposed a ten-point program that would help; his suggestions range from citizen education about the G7/G8 through the inclusion of parliamentarians in the dialogue to using the media more effectively (Kirton 2002).

Fourth, civil society and the G8 need each other. The injustices of indebtedness of the poorest countries, environmental degradation, lack of access to affordable medicines to fight against devastating diseases, educational deficits — these are major concerns of civil society, and civil society plays a crucial role in campaigning, mobilization and lobbying. But

debt forgiveness and health and education measures must be implemented by the governments of rich countries, powerful institutions such as the G7/G8, the **International Monetary Fund**, the **World Bank** and the **World Trade Organization**, as well as the business sector. A multi-stakeholder solution is therefore the most promising one.

References

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Further Readings

- Hajnal, Peter (2001), "Civil Society at the 2001 Genoa G8 Summit," *Behind the Headlines* 58 (1) <www.g8.utoronto.ca/g7/scholar/hajnal2002/hajnal2002may.pdf> (May 2002).
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Discussion Questions

1. How important are rock stars such as Bono, the Edge, and Bob Geldof in leading civil society causes in ways that induce G8 leaders to pay more attention and change policies toward issues such as debt relief of the poorest and African development?
2. Should there be a civil society forum in which civil society leaders can meet with G7/G8 leaders collectively at the annual Summit? If so, how should it be composed and organized?
3. As all G8 countries are representative democracies, what role should Parliamentarians or legislators play in the G7/8 process, system, and Summit?
4. What went wrong at Genoa, in terms of G8–civil society relations? What should be done at Kananaskis as a result?
5. What are the various types of civil society actors that come to Summits and what kind of relationship should the G7/8 have with each?
6. Bono's fame as a rock star may have done much for his influence as a G7/8 activist, but his role as G7/8 activist has done nothing for his career as a rock star. Discuss.

Quiz

1. The first civil society coalition to attend the annual G7 Summit in large numbers was:
 - a. the Group of 77
 - b. the World Economic Forum
 - c. the Black Bloc
 - d. The Other Economic Summit
2. The G7 first used the terms "civil society" and "NGO" at their Summit in:
 - a. Toronto 1988
 - b. London 1991
 - c. Halifax 1995
 - d. Genoa 2001
3. The 1998 Birmingham Summit featured a large lobby for debt relief on the part of:
 - a. Jubilee 1998
 - b. Jubilee 2000
 - c. EnviReform
 - d. the Organization of African Unity
4. A recent leader of civil society at the Summit on debt relief and African development has been the Irish singer Bono of the group:
 - a. The Edge
 - b. Riverdance
 - c. the James Joyce Quartet
 - d. U2
5. The 2002 People's Summit will be convened at the:
 - a. University of Toronto
 - b. University of Alberta
 - c. University of Calgary
 - d. University of Kananaskis