Civil society organizations (CSOs) are groups such as developmental and environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, women’s organizations, faith-based organizations and trade unions. They have had much success in addressing global problems like climate change, food insecurity, drought, resource scarcity and poverty. But despite the many CSO victories, we are facing an unprecedented environmental and social crisis.

Increasingly, civil society leaders are questioning the efficacy of current strategies and are searching for new ways to tackle the systemic and cultural root causes of global environmental and social crises. Here we discuss a number of key opportunities for CSOs to fulfill their potential as effective change agents.

The Need for a Course Correction

As economic development improves the material conditions of millions, we are moving beyond the earth’s capacity to supply resources such as fresh drinking water and clean air and to absorb waste. The consumption habits of a growing global middle class are intensifying the pressure on the planet’s ecosystems, and the poorest, most vulnerable communities are the most affected (as exemplified by droughts in Africa or floods in Bangladesh).

Local solutions are often insufficient when the causes of climate change, biodiversity loss and other problems are geographically distant and the effects fall most heavily upon future generations. Conventional approaches to solving global problems break them down into manageable pieces, but the complexity of such problems often leads to unintended consequences somewhere else in the system. 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 can lead to soil degradation and greenhouse gas emissions.

It is important to ask whether governments, businesses and CSOs are taking the complexity of economic and ecological systems into account in their responses. The dominant paradigm of free markets and economic growth constrains the actions of governments, businesses, individuals and other social actors, limiting the development of effective responses to the environmental and social crises we all confront. Governments are reluctant to act, caught between the need for tough remedial action and the short-term imperatives of economic growth. Businesses, due to the nature of financial markets and the pressure to grow shareholder value, are limited in what they can do. Individual consumers’ behavior and motivations are deeply entrenched in social norms and fueled by unhelpful economic incentives; even when people step out of their roles as consumers, they have little individual impact on the structural and cultural dynamics that are driving the crises.

Civil society organizations are a set of social actors that have the potential to tackle global problems. They include well-known NGOs like Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, Oxfam and Transparency International. CSOs have missions with society’s interests at heart, they make a positive difference, and people trust them. A poll of nearly 5,000 people in 22 countries found that NGOs command trust among 62 percent of the public, more than businesses, government or the media. Although these organizations have the capacity and mandate to be an important force in confronting intertwined global challenges, many CSOs are recognizing that their current strategies may not be sufficient to address the structural and cultural drivers of today’s crises. A recent survey by the Action Town Project of CSO leaders suggests some core reasons.

First, most large national and international CSOs tend to pragmatically focus on short-term solutions instead of tackling root causes. This is because of pressure from most funders to make a short-term impact and CSOs’ fear of losing credibility with their base if they demand more systemic shifts. As a consequence, many CSO visions remain based on the assumption that problems can be solved within the existing system. However, this approach often leads to tackling the symptoms in the short run without solving problems in the long run.
Second, 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 and the lack of progress at the Rio+20 Earth Summit have demonstrated that rational scientific arguments will not be enough to move the global political system to take strong action.

Third, most large national and international CSOs focus on single issues like climate change, marine protection or poverty alleviation. This specialization undermines connections across issues and effective collaborations across organizations. A prominent example of this has been the disconnect between human rights organizations that do not take the existence of ecological limits into account in their demands and, from the other direction, environmental organizations that pursue policies that do not take equity and human rights issues sufficiently into account.

With the planet hitting biophysical limits and economic growth failing to alleviate poverty, it has become clear that an issue-by-issue approach within conventional development values and institutional structures is not working. It is not leading us to the path of sustainable and equitable development that we so urgently need: a policy trajectory in which the environment is sustained for current and future generations and the benefits of economic activity are widely and equitably shared.

Such a transition will require broad and deep change across many areas: technology, legislation, economic and governance institutions, social relations, culture and values. Therefore, CSO strategies must emphasize that a focus on small incremental improvements will not be sufficient and, indeed, might even undermine the possibility of transformative change. Instead, CSOs need urgently to develop and put into practice strategies that embrace the cultural and systemic root causes behind the social and environmental crises of our times.

Leveraging the Full Potential of CSOs

If a narrow policy approach has failed to galvanize enough public support to drive the political will for more radical government action, CSOs need to fundamentally redesign their strategies. This will require that CSOs abandon their current fragmentation and start working toward a common and coherent vision that addresses the root causes of our sustainability crisis, such as human values, lifestyles and economic structures. With that in mind, CSOs need to rethink and redesign the ways they work, along the lines of the following strategies.

1. Finding a new vision: Nobody knows exactly how we will achieve a sustainable world or what it will look like. There is need for a broad diversity of ideas, approaches and policies. Indeed, differences in history, culture, geography and the like will both ensure and require many different visions and pathways. However, the more CSOs can agree on the core values and principles for a transition to sustainability, the more successful they will be as change agents.

The so-called Great Transition constitutes a flexible vision for a sustainable global economy and society. It was originally developed by the Global Scenario Group, making a deliberate analogy to The Great Transformation, the book written by Karl Polanyi about the Industrial Revolution. The Great Transition implies that deep systemic change, similar to the Industrial Revolution, is what we need now. It demands that societal values and lifestyles, as well as the structures of the current economic system, which are not set in stone, must change if we want to have a serious chance of tackling today’s global crises. The paradigm of the Great Transition has the potential to align a diverse range of CSO sectors, such as developmental and environmental NGOs, community groups, faith-based organizations and trade unions, under one unifying vision, thereby providing a new source of collective strength.

2. Embedding systems thinking in CSO practice: Adequately addressing pressing global problems like climate change requires understanding the complex interconnections within the wider system of which they are a part. Since neither traditional issue-by-issue approaches nor linear cause-effect analysis are adequate, deeper systemic change in our culture and the economy is needed in order to tackle interconnected sustainability issues. It is therefore essential for success that CSOs start using the variety of systems-thinking tools available to examine overarching structures and develop strategies to navigate system complexity. Examples of such tools are organizational learning processes, individual capacity building and leadership programs.

To deal with worsening social and environmental trends, national and international civil society organizations will have to collaborate across issues—mending the current disconnect between human rights and ecological degradation.

3. Developing a new narrative: Recognition that a sustainable economy must radically reduce its resource consumption and
waste is in tension with the dominant materialistic and individualistic values embedded in 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 with emergent sustainability values. Indeed, CSOs can nurture a shift in cultural values by fostering collaboration across the range of different CSO sectors that embody values of community, affiliation and resilience. Such coalescence can advance a narrative and practice consistent with the principles of the Great Transition: the well-being of society, global empathy and the rights of future generations.

Mainstream policy discourse opens many windows for CSOs to act together and have an indirect impact on values. Perhaps the most striking example is the current debate in many countries about introducing alternative indicators to gross domestic product (e.g., in France, Germany, Austria and the United Kingdom). Since national governments increasingly acknowledge that excessive focus on GDP growth hurts rather than helps society and the environment, CSOs should create cross-sector alliances to push governments to take the big step from talking about to implementing new indicators that make well-being and environmental sustainability the key measures of successful development. This would create a key 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 that will suit 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 on 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 an opportunity for CSOs to collaboratively transform their specialized interests and narrow policy expertise through the co-creation of a narrative that aligns different social sectors under an umbrella of common values and principles. This new narrative must speak to the hearts and minds of a large number of people through a creative and compelling story about who we are and where we want to go.

4. Supporting system innovation: 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 large corporations cannot alone deliver this fundamental change of direction. Therefore, CSOs should get more actively involved in catalyzing bottom-up 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, helping to cross-fertilize and build movement connectivity. Initiatives that cultivate system innovation for a 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. New models of production, consumption, organization, ownership and governance, developed through bottom-up innovation and rooted in local traditions and resources, are key elements in the story of the Great Transition.

5. Encouraging 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. Yet, during a time of deepening crises, a Great Transition
can only succeed with the emergence of a global citizens movement that will "embrace diverse perspectives and existing movements as separate expressions of a common project."7

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 groups, 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 forums into professional, oligarchic and nonparticipatory ‘Astroturf’ organizations. This needs to change.

Because it is unlikely that a global citizens movement will spontaneously emerge through bottom-up self-organization, CSOs can play a crucial role on various fronts to help facilitate its birth and development. In order for such a movement to crystallize, civil society must overcome the current ‘politics of opposition’ and develop new models of leadership and collaboration.

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. CSOs can support the expansion of these kinds of initiatives by providing resources and expertise. Additionally, large CSO networks can use their combined power and trust to inspire their members and a broader range of citizens toward a global citizens movement.

6. Engaging funders in systemic CSO strategies: CSOs will require funding in order 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 favor a narrow issue oriented approach... encouraging NGOs to specialize in delineated niches (or ‘issue silos’).”8 Therefore, CSOs will need to work with change agents in the funding community and make the case for supporting a more comprehensive strategy.

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 funding sources, alternative sources of support might gain more prominence (for example, crowd funding, in which people pool money and other resources, usually via the Internet, to support efforts initiated by others).

A Way Forward: The Smart CSOs Lab

CSOs can play a vital role in realizing the potential of the Great Transition. The Smart CSOs Lab was created to pursue this objective. It is a collaborative initiative, with participants from organizations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Action Aid, Transparency International, the Tellus Institute and the New Economics Foundation, among many others. They are working across disciplines in a community of practice to build effective CSO strategies for advancing the Great Transition. The initiative supports CSO leaders and change agents in developing cohesive strategies for CSO campaigns and projects. It is developing and testing capacity-building programs that support staff in enacting these new strategies. The lab is also catalyzing critical research on how CSOs can more effectively influence the social and political systems toward the Great Transition.

The Smart CSOs Lab encourages CSOs to move beyond piecemeal and fragmentary responses to instead develop strategies that align with the social and economic Great Transition. Ultimately, the aim is to change the course of CSO strategies so that they 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 opportunity and the 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 to work with 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.

Acknowledgments

This article was written with the invaluable assistance of Orion Kriebman, Pamela Pezzati and Paul Raskin. It was originally published in “Solutions,” August 2012.

Endnotes

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