



Globalizing Civil Society From the Inside Out
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Facilitated by:
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REPORT FROM THE GCS PROJECT
(Draft of Executive Summary, February 2003)

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Abstract: The Globalizing Civil Society project has sought to bring together activists from community organizations, based primarily in low-income communities of color, to consider how globalization is impacting their work. Community leaders who participated in this process recognize the importance of global issues and the potential of global justice movements, and they are eager to have their voices shape current progressive strategy on this topic. At the same time, they are concerned about anchoring their work in local and immediate concerns, and in developing popular education modules to better engage their base constituencies. There is ample room for foundation initiatives that could support the continued involvement of grassroots organizers and leaders in global justice conversations, including support for participation in international meetings, further outreach to “unusual suspects,” new popular education strategies and tools, peer-to-peer exchanges, and the development of multiple tables for strategic conversations and planning.

INTRODUCTION

The accelerating globalization of the U.S. economy has given rise to a chorus of critics that stress the uneven costs and benefits between North and South, as well as the imbalance between social groups within the U.S. itself. But while evidence suggests that low-income communities of color are often hardest hit by the economic strains induced by the multiple pressures induced by globalization, community leaders and organizations from these areas have not always had a prominent voice in the global justice movement.

Globalizing Civil Society From the Inside Out (GCS) is a project intended to stimulate the involvement of community based organizations (CBOs) in the dialogue around globalization, and is also intended to inform the thinking of the Ford Foundation and potentially other funders on how best to facilitate such engagement. The project, coordinated by the Center for Justice, Tolerance, and Community of UC Santa Cruz and the Inter-American Forum of the Collins Center in Miami, was structured around two weekend convenings that took place during the fall of 2002 in Santa Cruz and Miami, respectively. Follow-up included sponsorship of a delegation to the January 2003 to the World Social Forum and a meeting with a select number of the activists consider next steps held in New York City in March 2003.

A central issue in recruiting participants was the need to bring “unusual suspects” to the debate, including organizations that might not be currently directly engaged in work around globalization. Given the representational problems identified above, we were particularly interested in groups that were not primarily focused on international solidarity but rather focused on how the community concerns of their constituencies might be addressed by adding an international dimension to their understanding and organizing.

To insure that we would go beyond the individuals already well-identified with globalization issues, we engaged in an extensive research and interview process that identified over 200 domestic candidates; interviews were conducted with 75 to 100, with this providing both a strong initial base and a way to understand networks and expand recruiting. From this pool, two participant groups of 25 were chosen and asked to participate; virtually all agreed and once on board, were provided with support for travel and lodging, a reader to create a common base of understanding, and a list of the other participants.

We hoped that 75% of the convening participants would be activists of color and easily exceeded this mark. Other goals included gender balance, youth representation, regional or geographic diversity, and a mix of involvement by leaders from environmental, labor, rural, border, and immigrant organizations; overall, these goals were met although the youth attendance in Miami was much lower. Throughout both the recruitment and agenda planning phases, we benefited from the advice and outreach activities of a steering committee of 14 prominent community leaders and resource people (see the list on the first page).

THE MEETINGS AND THE MESSAGES

The convenings began with a *conocimiento* (an extensive getting-to-know-you session based on our work in Latino and Latin American communities) so that participants could become familiar with each other on a personal and values level. The rest of each meeting was highly interactive, including a mix of small and large group discussion as well as panels on progressive responses to global challenges and a module in which participants demonstrated various popular education modules on the global economy. Each convening also included a “case study”: In Santa Cruz, we discussed the struggle to keep a factory open in Chicago by forming alliances with workers in the countries where the factory owners wished to relocate, and in Miami, we considered a real-life example of globalization impacts on South Central Los Angeles. The Miami case was more developed: we presented the initial situation, and then participants worked to devise their own response strategies and finally to hear from the actual L.A.-based leadership to understand what they, in fact, did and how it has worked. Both meetings concluded with a discussion of next steps to facilitate further conversation.

There are several central messages that came from these meetings. The full report offers more context as to how these messages were developed as well as details about our process. Here we break the messages into two main categories (similar to the framework used for the main sections of the report): Engaging the Global, and Moving the Conversation.

Engaging the Global

- Groups recognize that the global economy is affecting their lives and work, including placing limits on the possibilities for progressive change. But at the same time, maintaining a local focus is central because this is where grassroots organizations draw their base.
- This has two implications: First, whatever community groups do on this issue cannot be at the cost of diverting attention from ongoing concerns around local conditions; rather, the engagement with the global should complement their current work. Issues like privatization, immigration, or securing local benefits from trade investments often fit this bill.
- Second, popular education is critical, including the continuing development of tools and information. Participants shared numerous innovative techniques, including short exercises that built from community experience and longer-term study circles tailored to developing and learning from the analysis of grassroots leadership.
- Part of this popular education should focus on helping to sharpen our definition of globalization. There is an acknowledgement that this is not a new phenomenon but also an understanding that there is a qualitatively different character given technology and the rapidity of corporate decision-making and relocation. At the same time, the current era of U.S. military intervention abroad leads many to wonder if we are simply seeing a new face on an old method of domination.

- With regard to engaging local communities in these debates, there is a tension between the campaign model and the political education model. The former, which might include, for example, opposition of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), is often highly focused, policy-oriented, and “doable,” but it does not necessarily lead to a deeper understanding and a broadening of the constituency for change. The political education model stresses the analysis, strategy, and base for longer-term change but it is hard, patient work. Community leaders understood the need for campaigns but also emphasized the need for strategic reflection.
- There is also an engagement tension between community-based organizations that want to take advantage of global links, particularly around transportation infrastructure, and those that believe that any participation in the globalization process stymies deeper structural reform. While the latter and perhaps more analytically clear direction has received more support from intermediaries and some foundations, the attempt to secure benefits has secured a significant base in communities of color eager for the higher-quality employment associated with exports.
- This dynamic between incorporation and opposition needs to be discussed if we are to move forward with truly diversifying the grassroots globalization forces and if we are serious about engaging communities where they are at rather than where we wish they were. One alternative is to insure that any engagement effort around specific community benefits also include the broader community education frameworks discussed above.
- There is a desire for the conversation started in the convenings and elsewhere be continued. Guiding any vehicle for this should be a central principle: **the task is to engage and shape the global while building local power and community voice.**

Moving the Conversation

- Given the relative inexperience of many community groups with the globalization debate and the simultaneous need of the anti- and grassroots globalization forces to diversify their ranks, there is a clearly a need for the sort of convenings GCS has sponsored. These should continue, particularly with rank-and-file leadership, and should focus on capacity-building in various forms.
- Of particular importance is the need to continue to reach out to “unusual suspects” – those who are not already involved in globalization issues. This will require continuing outreach and identification along the lines utilized by the GCS process and other processes.
- In building a community of those concerned with these issues, we need to realize that building trust – between groups, between communities and foundations, between academics and activists, between different sorts of social movements – takes time. Rather than quickly responding to a “fad” in the foundation world, community groups want to need to see what is common in the globalization frame, to ascertain whether people really want to work together, and to affirm the possibilities based on this exploratory process.

- In terms of continuing the conversation, there is a tension between forming a loose network of interested community groups and working through a more traditional institutional form, such as an intermediary, to help with popular education and strategic reflection. The former squares with democratic principles and allows for many voices but might not have the singular institutional commitment and capacity for continuing the work.
- Any new effort should coordinate with existing efforts to broaden the globalization debate, such as the “Chicago process” that sponsored the attendance of numerous community leaders at last year’s World Social Forum and facilitated new participants this year. In December 2002 and January 2003, GCS aligned itself as a partner in that established effort and, in collaboration with those leaders, selected, sponsored, and supported participants for this year’s World Social Forum.
- This participation in the WSF is just one form of exchanges between workers, activists, and others that participants thought would be important. Hearing about the global experience from an organizer working in another area or country, and seeing the parallels with one’s own issues and work, really makes the connection. Participants felt that this sort of peer-to-peer exchange, particularly of the transnational variety, should be part of any new effort. In general, there is a need to consider multiple “points of entry.”
- There is also a critical need for resources for analysis and education – that is, tools to help make clear the global-local link and motivate grassroots activists to action. Most participants agreed that the first step is to establish a foundation of knowledge through popular education that is geared toward the local perspective. A consistent message throughout the convenings was that the current discourse and language used to characterize globalization fails to resonate at the community level.
- Since there are many groups already involved in the globalization debate, some participants suggested a tiered learning model in which there would be some sessions and workshops designed for newcomers to the global justice movement and more reliance on intense training by sector for more experienced CBOs. While this responded to the need of some to develop their capacity to debate globalization, there was also a concern that separating groups by levels of understanding might work against the full incorporation of new participants into the broader movement.
- An additional avenue for both those more experienced and those more recently arrived to the globalization debate would be leadership exchanges, including short stays or continuing mentoring by organizers from one group with organizers from another. This could be loosely coordinated and allow for a bottom-up process of agenda generation.
- One of the main conditions for pursuing the GCS initiative or any continuing learning opportunities further is finding new funds and philanthropic support. **It is essential to CBOs that foundation interest in global approaches will deepen and not dilute their work within their community, which must remain first priority.**

CONCLUSION

The GCS convenings suggest that the interest in making the global-local link is extremely high, but cautious. Many organizations in the communities most deeply affected by globalization are already engaged and others both recognize the importance and are looking for new ways to educate and involve constituencies. While there is a recognition that past globalization efforts may have been disproportionately focused on international solidarity *per se* or may not have fully included communities of color in leadership and agenda-setting, there is a broad understanding of the evolution of the contemporary globalization movement and a desire to both compliment and complement those efforts.

In moving forward, there are particular concerns about engaging the funder community in this effort: there is a worry that a new focus on globalization would take away from base-building, a desire to receive the needed long-term support for capacity-building and popular education, and a sense that organizations should move deliberately and build on existing efforts rather than institutionalize a new national network.

Despite the cautions, this may be a time for both communities and foundations to make the investments necessary to engage more local organizations in the global debate. We live both in a time of great despair and great hope. A probable war in the Middle East reflects one side of the equation but the election of Lula in Brazil reflects the other. The slogan of the World Social Forum is that “Another World is Possible.” But it will only come about if we think in a clear way about both the broader global forces that affect us and the possibilities for positive change when we build from a community base.