

CONCEPT PAPER

A Regional CSO/Stakeholder Engagement Mechanism for Post-2015: Proposal from Asia-Pacific Region

1. Introduction

Civil society organisations (CSOs) today engage formally and informally with various intergovernmental and United Nations (UN) processes and entities on sustainable development. The current practices of CSO engagement have evolved over time. From being mere observers in the early 1990s, intergovernmental deliberations today include a wide range of external actors such as NGOs, CSOs, constituency groups, private sector entities, local authorities and parliamentarians. Many processes allow greater participation than before in different governance functions, including global agenda-setting, dialogues and hearings, implementation of outcomes, monitoring and evaluation.

This increasing participation by non-state actors has been supported from within the UN and from key governments, mainly based on the realization that better development processes and outcomes hinge on broad participation. While support from governments and the UN is crucial, it is important that civil society takes an ownership in designing and evolving existing engagement mechanisms from the bottom-up. This way, it may be possible to anticipate effective, transparent and coherent participation in the coming years. This paper will present options for such mechanism that civil society in Asia-Pacific region may adopt in engaging UN processes relating to the post-2015 development agenda and the envisioned sustainable development goals (SDGs).

2. Background: Brief History of CSO Engagement with the UN System

Since the UNCED and the establishment of the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) in 1993, the nine major groups identified by Agenda 21 have become the main engagement modality for non-governmental actors in some parts of the UN system. In many instances the term 'CSO/civil society engagement' is used in conjunction with a reference to major groups and stakeholders. This indicates that non-state actor engagement in UN processes is evolving beyond the categories of the major groups, as can be gleaned from the models of CSO engagement in the FAO, CBD, UNFCCC, WHO, UNCHR, etc.

This development has been underway for a while. In 2004, then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed a Panel of Eminent Persons to examine the relationship of the UN with CSOs, concluding that "enhanced engagement could help the United Nations do a better job, further its global goals, become more attuned and responsive to citizens' concerns and enlist greater public support" (United Nations 2004:8).

Current UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon reiterated at the World Economic Forum Davos in 2009 that "Our times demand a new definition of leadership - global leadership. They demand a new constellation

of international cooperation - governments, civil society and the private sector, working together for a collective global good." Thus the trend towards better participation is clear, and the key will be how civil society decides to use that space.

3. Rationale: The Need for a More Coherent Regional CSO/Stakeholder Engagement Mechanism

While providing a structured means to manage diversity among civil society, many argue that the major group engagement mechanism while formalizing non-governmental participation has also reduced the scope and role of CSO engagement with the UN system (Adams and Pingeot, June 2013). Firstly the nine major groups by genesis and character are diverse and different. Placing local authorities, business and NGOs in a uniform engagement mechanism has created limited space for more radical social groups to voice their opinion and affect change within intergovernmental negotiations and other processes. Some critical observations are also made to the diminished role of regional representation of CSO and other stakeholder engagement; this was demonstrated during the concluded Rio+20 Conference in 2012.

Moreover, CSO or stakeholder engagement is approached diversely within the UN system. Different agencies use different accreditation mechanisms and different systems of organizing the engagement of non-state actors in intergovernmental processes, and different venues provide different criteria for participation. This paper seeks to propose options for a regional engagement mechanism with the UN system in the Asia-Pacific region.

CSO engagement in the regional sustainable development policy processes should be, to the largest extent possible, holistic, coherent and inclusive. It should concern all three (economic, social, and environmental) dimensions of sustainable development and its intersecting areas, and for this reason it is important to consider how to introduce and design an overarching mechanism that is intuitive and effective enough to allow for constructive and substantive engagement with the UN, across the board. A coherent CSO engagement mechanism in sustainable development processes within the UN system may help better show the convergences between the three dimensions of sustainable development.

A coherent CSO engagement mechanism within the regional UN system would be important, firstly, to help bring about the "global partnership for sustainable development" (UNCSD 2012), which is recognised as crucial for implementing policies and agreements on the ground. Second, if such mechanism would be designed by civil society themselves, it is likely to be beneficial for overall ownership of such mechanism. Third, a comprehensive CSO/stakeholder engagement mechanism would help with greater outreach for information and knowledge engagement that will pave the way for the implementation of SD policies and development goals at lower levels, where civil society constituencies are rooted. Fourth, and importantly, such a mechanism, if institutionalized across the UN and with governments would ensure that non-state actor inputs into all stages of policy formulation and implementation are approached in a uniform and transparent way. Such a mechanism can provide checks and balances in a common future we all want and would benefit the universality of outcomes.

4. Characteristics of a Possible Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism

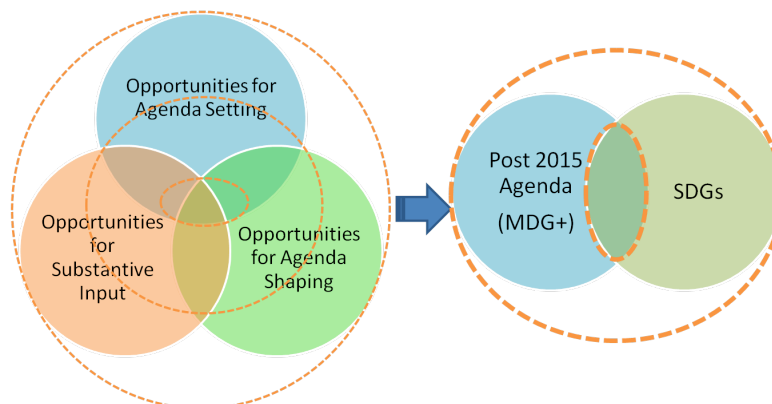
The key objectives of a CSO engagement mechanism would be to allow regional input into regional processes, as these are currently not as strongly consolidated as global processes. But there may be important, regional specific inputs into many stages of governance, which may gain a better voice if a new engagement mechanism can be proposed. While of course policies are not always thought out and implemented in a logical and linear fashion, it may help to think about entry points for useful CSO engagement by using an adapted version of Lasswell's (1956) Stages Approach to policy making, as in the figure below:

Figure 1: The Policy Management cycle



Using this adapted tool to envision the different roles that stakeholder can play in a future partnership for implementing sustainable development, several functions come to mind that span across all five areas of envisioning, planning, doing (implementing), monitoring, and learning. However, since this paper focuses on regional intergovernmental processes, emphasis will be placed on the beginning and tail ends of this policy-management cycle. This is because often agendas are set at the level of the UN, and CSOs play a central role in helping shape that agenda, equally the reporting and learning stages take place in the regional intergovernmental arenas. The now defunct Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) had the so-called Regional Implementation Meetings (RIM), where countries as well as stakeholders shared experiences with implementation and helped shape future agendas. These governance functions are poised to evolve under the auspices of the newly formed High Level Political Forum (HLPF) - an outcome of the 2012 Rio+20 Conference (UNCSD 2012), which is supposed to be a stronger iteration of the CSD. In this context a regional and bottom-up proposal for CSO engagement can make good sense, and helping shape a strong and inclusive agenda for the sustainable development agenda and the outcomes of the post-2015 process is a timely contribution coming from CSOs in the Asia-Pacific region.

Figure 2: Key Aims of the CSO Engagement Mechanism



Civil society spans many functions which are already practised at grass-roots level, and in particular for implementation, the role of partnerships will be important. But in the immediate context of a regional engagement mechanism with the UN and other intergovernmental bodies, the following paragraphs will focus only on agenda setting, agenda shaping and substantive input functions, although these are not all exhaustive. As the figure indicates, the main aims of the regional CSO engagement mechanism involve primarily **increasing opportunities for CSO's engagement in agenda setting, agenda shaping, as well as opportunities for substantive inputs**. Such functions will be relevant for both post-2015 as well as the SDG related processes, regardless to which extent these two processes will eventually converge.

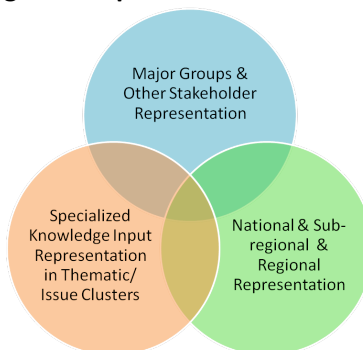
Regarding **Opportunities for agenda shaping**, CSOs have historically been able to critically shape international agendas designed and determined by governments in multilateral processes. While CSOs have had to struggle and campaign for shaping these bureaucratic and political agendas in the form of conventions, treaties and programmes, an appropriate, transparent and inclusive CSO engagement mechanism would help the UN system to realize its interest in ensuring CSOs and stakeholders as partners in sustainable development.

CSOs have historically provided content inputs in deliberations at the UN system and have been recognized for their expertise in various thematic areas and issues related to sustainable development. However, the opportunity to **provide substantive input** has often been subject to the discretion of officials of UN agencies and governments and their opinions on and relationship with individuals or organizations. A legitimate engagement mechanism here would be extremely important to objectively identify appropriate expertise based on competence and track record, and engage the relevant CSOs in providing substantive inputs without compromising the quality of processes and with confidence in enhancing the outcome.

Having briefly summarized the three main functions of CSO's engagement at the intergovernmental level, the different constituencies should also be considered, when thinking about widening the representation of CSO groups from the original major group system. The choice of CSO representatives could incorporate three broad, sometimes overlapping and not mutually exclusive criteria/categories. The first is through the major groups and stakeholder representativeness, as already exists. The second criterion is based on geographical constituency which would include national, sub-regional to regional representativeness. Thirdly, CSOs could be identified for their thematic and issue based expertise. It is important to stress that these three categories can be overlapping, and that the choice of which

category should be weighted most heavily will be context dependent. Thus some processes call for geographical representation, others for constituency-based representation, and again others may weigh substantive input. Conceptually speaking, this relationship, and its overlaps can be illustrated as in Figure 3:

Figure 3: Categories of possible future CSO representation

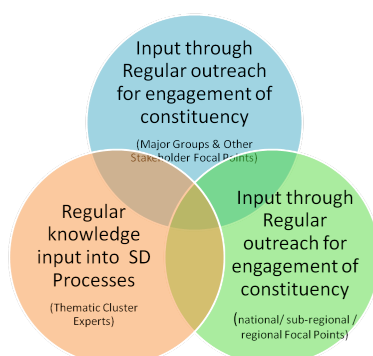


5. Considerations for the Proposed Mechanism

Such a model could pave the way for further engagement criteria. Many already exist in well-functioning practices in other fora. It could be very useful to distil these from practices within UN treaties, UNEP, the Commission on Food Security and others. Important preliminary considerations should include:

- **Mandate:** The Regional CSO Mechanism will coordinate and facilitate the engagement of CSOs with the UN system in Asia-Pacific. The official mandate of the Mechanism will be agreed and adopted by a meeting of representatives of CSO constituencies in March 2014.
- **Objectives:** The main objective of the mechanism is to coordinate with and provide guidance to UN agencies and processes in the region related to sustainable development to facilitate CSO engagement and ensure a broad mandate and capacity of CSO representatives.
- **Roles and responsibilities:** Any engagement mechanism should also come with a set of roles and responsibilities from the CSOs. The model provides different functions and responsibilities for each grouping category (Figure 4).

Figure 4: A Mechanism with Roles and Responsibilities

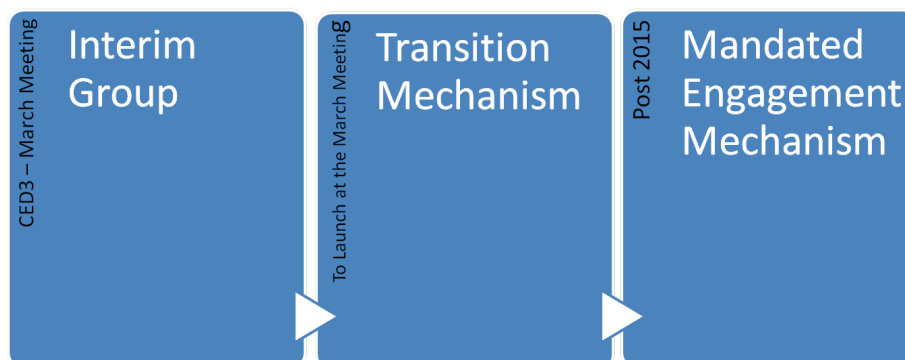


- **Qualitative and quantitative engagement:** The credibility of a process outcome is largely related to its inclusiveness. The proposed prototype considers both aspects of quantity and quality of CSO engagement. By identifying key thematic expertise from the different constituencies, the UN system will have access to both quantitative and qualitative participation that enhances the credibility and public acceptability of outcomes.
- **Representation and representativeness:** criteria pertaining to gender balance, balanced participation from grass roots and marginalized groups to ensure their voices are heard.

6. The Process

An 'Interim Group' was established at the ESCAP CED3 Meeting in October 2013 to conceptualise, design and organise a 'Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism' for sustainable development processes within the UN system. The Interim Group has initiated the process towards forming a 'Regional CSO Engagement Committee' in a meeting of CSOs from the region in May 2014, in conjunction with the APFSD. The ultimate end-point will be to have a functioning new mechanism for engagement in place for the period post-2015, so that the full potential of broad civil society expertise and representation can be harnessed for the implementation of new development goals.

Figure 4: A Roadmap for a Transition CSO Engagement Mechanism



The interim group (IG), which came together in October 2013, will work closely with UNESCAP towards the conceptualisation and designing of the transition mechanism. The period of operation of the IG will be from October 2013 to May 2014.

The Transition Mechanism: A "Regional CSO Engagement Committee" (RCEC) will be created and given an official mandate at the regional CSO meeting in May 2014, to lead the transition mechanism that will be in place until March 2016. This will allow the RCEC to engage and test different iterations of the mechanism through the adoption of the SDGs in 2014 and the Post 2015 Agenda in 2015. A detailed action plan will be developed by the RCEC as soon as it is convened. The transition mechanism is perceived as an incubator period for the CSO engagement mechanism to be tested and further consulted in specific engagements, both within the CSO groupings themselves and with ESCAP and other UN agencies in the region when appropriate.

The decision to create the RCEC will be arrived at by consensus in the discussion among CSOs attending the Regional CSO Consultation prior to the APFSD. If the CSO meeting decides to create an RCEC, the first committee will be elected and the mandate and modalities of work of the RCEC for its limited two-year term will be agreed upon by the CSOs present.

In preparation for the Regional CSO Consultation, the IG will conduct a regional CSO mapping process according to suggested criteria and characteristics proposed for a new engagement mechanism and conduct an outreach to draw support and additional inputs from broader CSO constituencies. Subsequently, a mapping of CSOs working on sustainable development and interested in contributing to UN processes will be conducted, commencing from December 2013. The initial database will be drawn from existing list servers and through recommendations and direct contact. Criteria for mapping will be based on the two constituency representation criteria (stakeholder/major group and national/sub-regional/regional) and thematic/issue based interests. Other ancillary criteria will evolve while working with different UN agencies and processes.

7. Main Features of the Proposed Mechanism

Key features of the Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism should include that it;

- I. acts in a voluntary capacity to serve the best interest of the regional CSO fraternity;
- II. provides advice on selection of representatives through an open consultative process;
- III. consists of members representing the nine major groups and other identified stakeholder groups, sub-regions, and thematic/issue expertise;
- IV. undertakes liaison with UN agencies and process authorities, making nominations for event and process participation, regional and sub-regional outreach and engagement coordination, thematic and issue content coordination, developing position papers as necessary, etc.
- V. Members of this RCEC are elected through a nomination and mandating process. Details are attached (see annex with agenda for CSO meeting prior to Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development in May 2014).

References:

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- De Zoysa, Uchita, *Towards a CSO Engagement Mechanism with the Regional UN System*, Presentation to UNESCAP at the CED3, 2013, Bangkok
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- United Nations. *Note by the Secretary General*. Fifty-eighth Session Agenda item 59. *Strengthening of the United Nations system*. General Assembly 2004, Fifty-eighth Session.