

Notes, Brainstorming Session on a Global Social Observatory

Geneva, 19 June 2003

Present: Christophe Bellmann, ICTSD; Alain Clerc and Louise Lassonde, WSIS Executive Secretariat; Caroline Dommen, 3D Associates; Pierre Gheysans, Caterpillar; Mr. Marion F. Hellmann Theurer, IFBWW; Leo Palma, ACWL; Jean Perlin, UNAIDS; Kate Taylor, World Economic Forum; Mike Waghorne, PSI Secretariat; Hans-Peter Werner, WTO; Kathrine A. HAGEN and Susan Brown, HRI, and Erfried Adam, FES Geneva.

Erfried Adam kicked off the session by offering a few words concerning the objectives and political affiliations of the sponsoring organization of the session, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Katherine Hagen followed, setting out her personal motivations for getting involved in this initiative and briefly summarizing her vision as regards its purpose. She concluded by mentioning the on-going work of the ILO's World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation and the parallels between its mandate and the questions that a Social Observatory might address. By comparison, she said, the Social Observatory would be "considerably more informal in terms of its approach". It would also seek to involve a more diverse group of stakeholders than is represented in the ILO's tripartite constituency.

Each of the participants then introduced her/himself, describing his/her institutional affiliation, and highlighting aspects of his/her work that might have particular relevance for a Social Observatory. There followed a more informal "brainstorming" session with key contributions as follows:

Louise Lassonde, Coordinator for the Civil Society Division, World Summit on the Information Society Executive Secretariat and former member of the Rio Summit's Executive Secretariat, country-director of a UN agency in Africa and regional director of an international development NGO – Referring to the institutional innovation reflected in the fact that the Secretariat for the WSIS consists of representatives from civil society as well as the ITU's member governments, Lassonde set out 3 areas of the Secretariat's work that might offer particularly relevant lessons: 1) A French initiative known as the "Open Wish Process, involving on-going negotiations that may – but need not necessarily - lead to binding obligations for ITU member states; 2) Joint work between the ITU and UNITAR, seeking to develop mechanisms to involve local authorities in multilateral rule-making, and; 3) Development of public-private partnerships, in the context of NEPAD, to promote South-South cooperation.

Hans-Peter Werner, Counselor in the WTO's External Relations Division – Described the constraints the WTO Secretariat faces in terms of its interactions with civil society groups given the formal guidelines that Member States have introduced to govern this process, and the lack of consensus amongst them concerning the political desirability of such interactions. He concluded that there is hope that a more comprehensive system to govern these relations will ultimately be institutionalized

and that some kind of framework for dialogue on thorny issues could address this gap and create opportunities for consensus-building.

Caroline Dommen, President of 3D Associates, a law firm specializing in International Law and Policy. Dommen is currently in the process of creating an NGO, Advisory Group on Trade and Human Rights that will serve as an interface between human rights groups and the WTO – Called for “improved understanding of how a human rights approach to trade policy making might be socially beneficial” and, more generally, better communication between the international organisations. Erfried Adam later picked up on Caroline’s remarks, observing that problems of “coherence” are endemic amongst the multilateral institutions. “There is, he said, “little formal dialogue between the institutions”.

Katherine Hagen observed that the Social Observatory was not intended to displace formal dialogue between international organizations but would facilitate bringing key people together from various institutions and interests on any issue where the formal dialogue was not producing a solution. She posed the question of what and how a Social Observatory might contribute something that is different from the existing constellation of interests and institutions. That is, could such an entity “add any useful element” to the social dialogues that are underway?

Mike Waghorne, Assistant General Secretary of the Public Services International Secretariat, responded by referring to his organisation’s extensive experience in dialoguing with various stakeholders and enquiring whether Katherine envisaged that the Observatory would operate in a manner similar to the Quakers, i.e. informally and using Chatham House rules?

Katherine said that Brewster Grace had, in fact, been invited to today’s meeting and that he was very interested in the GSO initiative. Having, herself, participated in a number of Quaker-sponsored gatherings whilst working for the ILO, she felt that the Quakers should be involved as a key player in any initiative such as this one. At the same time, she imagined that an Observatory would ultimately involve more institutionalized processes than the Quakers’ work.

In terms of unique contributions that might be made by the Observatory, Louise Lassond added that civil society is tired of dialogue that is not explicitly linked to output. In this sense, she felt that the work of any Observatory should be directly aligned with multilateral negotiations. How might this be done? The objective should be to “ease government decision-making” via creation of an “enabling network or service”. Proceeding from an inventory of various partners (at the local, national and international levels), the idea would be primarily to inform and train stakeholders.

Katherine next spoke of the need to reconcile the interests of the private sector with those of civil society. Can the gulf that exists between these two social entities today be bridged, she asked?

Alain Clerc, Director of the WSIS Civil Society Division and former special advisor to the Executive Director of UNEP and the Swiss government on sustainable development responded that the key to promoting coherent dialogue was coherence in the dialogues of participating entities, e.g. amongst members of a political party, a firm, a country, etc. The process has to be a phased one, proceeding from recognition of initial differences and building a “structured mechanism” to resolve them. Citing the ILO’s tripartite system of representation as an example from the industrial age, he concluded that new forms of governance involving civil society and the private sector are going to have to be imagined for post-industrial society. It will not be enough to merely consult these groups in the governance processes of tomorrow.

Mike Waghorne reiterated that PSI had had considerable experience with consultative processes at various levels of governance. One major concern that they had with respect to such consultation was that it was not effective in involving small and medium sized enterprises, e.g. in OECD dialogues. These entities are key employers in many countries.

Christophe Bellmann, Director of Policy Dialogues and Partnerships at the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development, formerly with the Swiss Coalition of Development Organisations, followed, expressing a series of concerns about “practical and concrete aspects of the proposal”: 1) Subject matter and varied participants – How would the Social Observatory isolate the social issues with which it will work? The Rio Summit demonstrated that social issues are linked. Each issue involves different interest communities, e.g. health, agriculture, etc. Identifying stakeholders will be a major and ongoing challenge; 2) Value-added – Dialogue, to be optimally beneficial, must be inclusive. There are many social groups that are organized – like unions – but, also, many that are not. How would the social observatory promote the participation of groups like Southern NGOs? 3) Agenda – On whose behalf will the Observatory be acting? Trust will be difficult to engender, especially if there are questions about the inclusiveness of any dialogues in which the Observatory is involved; 4) Use of the term Observatory – Describing the service as an observatory suggests that it will only perform a watching role. Is this how we see ourselves? 5) Linkages to on-going negotiations – Have we thought about how we might link ourselves to formalized decision-making processes?

In terms of the unique benefits that an Observatory might have to offer, Katherine said that she envisaged that it would not be involved in merely bringing together groups that might have common interests. Rather, the focus would be on promoting dialogue between groups with divergent and even conflicting interests. In addition, she was aware of the concern, most recently spelled out by a social activist involved in major UN conferences, Julian Disney, the former head of the ICSW, relating to the possibility that the traditional approach to observer status in various multilateral fora may be excluding a variety of legitimate voices.

Marion Hellmann, Assistant General Secretary of the International Federation of Building and Wood Workers Secretariat, then suggested that an example of this type

of dialogue comes from his experience with the Forestry Stewardship Council. The groups that are represented in the Forestry Stewardship Council have been drawn together from very divergent interests. The basic underlying conflict with which this group is dealing is between preserving jobs and safeguarding the environment. He went on to say that he found resonance in Louise Lassonde's suggestions and contrasted them with the UN's CONGO meetings. The latter, he said, are neither focused nor productive.

Jean Perlin, a retired Canadian diplomat with recent experience at both the ILO and UNAIDS then suggested that the key question for the Observatory's organizers to answer now must be, "What is it that a Social Observatory will do?" Implicit in this question is another query with respect to how the Observatory will accomplish its objectives. In terms of how to proceed, a concrete suggestion would be to start by developing a better understanding of the institutions that are already operating in this area, especially given that the traditional barriers between various social entities are breaking down. An important thing to bear in mind at the outset of such a project is to keep its focus narrow. This will prove invaluable in twigging the interest of potential donors. By way of an example, UNAIDS' mandate was one of advocacy. It pursued this via a strategy of providing information. The information, in turn, served to strengthen the group's argument that its issues were important ones.

Kate Taylor, a medical doctor and former McKinsey consultant, currently the Director of the World Economic Forum's Global Health Initiative followed with comments based on her experiences in working as a venture capitalist. In her view, the "business plan" for the Social Observatory was missing several key elements: 1) An understanding of who might be included in its potential market, i.e. governments (at various levels), the private sector, civil society, etc; 2) A clear perspective on the niche, or gap that the Observatory's "services" would fill; 3) A "value proposition", based on knowledge of the "core strengths" or competitive advantages that that we would bring to the undertaking; 4) Well-defined tools to put in place to provide for a reliable "pipeline for dialogues", and 5) Ideas for sources of funding. (As Katherine then noted, it was precisely to elicit ideas and recommendations such as these that the proposal had been intentionally left open-ended.)

Leo Palma, a former Filipino diplomat and corporate lawyer, now working for the Advisory Centre on WTO Law, responded, picking up on earlier remarks that had been made about the desirability of calling the entity an "observatory". An observatory, he said. "measures the movement of the stars, but it doesn't try to move them". For him, a key question was thus whether it is possible to influence decisions in the future based on knowledge of ones that have been made in the past. To the extent that it is individuals who ultimately take decisions and not institutions, he concluded that there may be an unfilled niche relating to this kind of "measurement role".

Caroline Dommen, in turn, responded with a question, asking why the Observatory was being conceived at the international level rather than a national one. Katherine said that this was probably a reflection of past experiences at the international level

and the need to search for new opportunities for the articulation of social commitments at that level. Taking action at the national level is a different kind of concern that merits support but depends on a country-by-country strategy.

Pierre Gheysens, an executive at Caterpillar's international headquarters, followed, saying that he thought that the challenges that a Social Observatory faced were similar to those with which business regularly contended. The key, in his view, is to involve all the relevant parties in a joint quest for mutually acceptable solutions. Everything must be clearly defined and understood amongst the participants. The ultimate objective is for the group to speak with one voice, in one language and at all levels.

Mike Waghorne offered three interim conclusions: 1) If the Social Observatory – like any advocacy group - were to adopt political positions, that would be its death knell; 2) The more formal the dialogue in which the group is involved, the less likely it is to make meaningful contributions, and 3) The most fruitful avenues for the Observatory to pursue would probably involve either the development of input into various negotiations processes or conflict resolution. If it were decided to go with the former, perhaps it might be more appropriate to refer to the network, entity, etc. as a “social laboratory”?

Hans-Peter Werner added that Mike Moore, the former WTO Director General always said that “Geneva was the place that blocked change”. Each of the Bretton Woods Institutions and all of the UN organizations had their institutional turf to protect. The purpose of the Social Observatory, in his view, should be to facilitate change. In this sense, he suggested a different perspective than Christophe Bellmann had suggested about how to decide which groups to include in the Observatory's work. In his view, critical decisions were typically taken by a very small group of people representing diverse interests but prepared and in a position to negotiate. Large groups are useful for the laying out of different positions, but negotiations required working with a manageable number of people.

Erfried Adam followed, picking up on earlier comments with respect to the desirability of calling the entity an Observatory as well as what might be the source of any value it would add. He saw the Observatory as a kind of “early warning” system for emerging problems. Its main contribution would come from the processes of communication that it would engender. These processes would promote understanding; they would be the source of any “value-added”.

Katherine suggested that the next step in the development of the idea of a Global Social Observatory might be to identify issues where an Observatory could test out or pilot its procedures. Possible issues could include: access to essential drugs; diversity; migration; nutrition and health; pension reform; potable water and employment (both formal and informal). In any case, a summary of the discussions will be shared with the participants. In addition, the ideas from the brainstorming session will be factored into the preparation of a revised document for the basic idea

itself. This was a fluid process, and the door, she said, “also remains open for further input” from any party that might have an interest.

Erfried concluded the session by thanking all the participants and noting that it may be appropriate to undertake further brainstorming on this proposition, most probably after the upcoming WTO Ministerial in Cancun. A subsequent session could involve a half-day, or an evening session over dinner to discuss operational aspects of the Observatory in more detail.

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