

“Today, we propose to look at WHO institutionally engaging with civil society as a matter of social accountability.”

Introductory remarks to the panel on the institutional challenge of WHO fully and coherently engaging with civil society as a matter of social accountability

Allow me to talk first about the “good old days”, as the matter we are going to discuss is not at all a new one. And I do not want to spoil the party, as the first session of the dialogue meeting was so intensive and so positive. Now we might look at some more tricky things.

You know, in 2001 WHO Director-General Brundtland established, within the WHO Secretariat, a so-called “Civil Society Initiative”. And in 2002, a remarkable review report on WHO’s interactions with civil society and NGOs concluded that “A new policy guiding WHO’s relations with civil society is clearly overdue given the importance of these relations to WHO in particular and public health in general.” Well, this is almost 20 years ago. The project of such a WHO civil society policy failed two years later. It was obstructed by some member states. This was the end of the story at that time.

Today, when we come back into a meeting with you, Dr Tedros, it is already a quite remarkable achievement that you accepted to engage in this series of dialogue meetings with us as “civil society”, and not just as “non-state actors” or “partners”. With the adoption of the “WHO Framework on Engagement with Non-State Actors”, four years ago, WHO has put civil society into one pot (the pot of non-state actors) together with philanthropic foundations and business associations, not only neglecting the power imbalances between these actors, and we are on the bad side of this imbalance, but also the particularities and particular challenges of interacting with civil society.

Anyhow, let us see the current series of dialogues as expression of a renewed and particular attention of you and of the top WHO leadership to civil society. Correct me if I am too optimistic.

Today, what we do in this meeting, is that we propose to add a new element – and quality – to our interaction. We propose to look at WHO institutionally engaging with civil society also as a matter of social accountability in the same way as we have discussed before at the country level and with the country challenges.

If you agree on this approach, then the work only begins, both for you and for us. Because, it is clear: participatory governance at the global level, and for multilateral institutions such as WHO, is not an easy thing. And it is not at all as clearly defined as at country level. For, us, for civil society, one of the problems is that we are from being a single and homogeneous constituency, even if this would make things easier for you and for your team. Unlike member states or the private sector with their hierarchical structures that are designed to produce one message, one direction, we cannot speak with a single voice. We always have to speak as many.

It was, for example, good to see how you, Dr Tedros, and your team engaged, over the last weeks, in those two first dialogue meetings on gender and youth, and I look forward to the next dialogue meetings with trickier issues such as healthy ageing, palliative care or digital health. But just be aware: In May, we had over 80 civil society statements at the World Health Assembly on Covid, and we had over 40 teams that proposed dialogue meeting with you. So do all of us need to go this way just to have your ear, and to have a space in a room with the WHO leadership?

So what we have seen is that WHO engagement with civil society, even if it is done well, takes too often place in an informal and improvised way, responding to particular initiatives such as this series of dialogue meetings or, in 2018, the WHO Civil Society Task Team, but not based on a sound institutional policy and culture and coherent practice.

This can be changed, I am sure. There are some ingredients to consider. We put them into our asks. You know the job. We do not need to tell you, if you go this way, how to do it properly.

**On how civil society to engage best in multistakeholder platforms
(answering a question by the moderator Justin Koonin)**

Ok, well, you know, I am not a friend of multistakeholder platforms, not at all. What we see is that WHO and the UN, and democratic multilateralism as such have become side-lined by this overall partnership or multistakeholder model. It promises quick results based on a voluntary cooperation by all who are ready to engage. And this might be the industry, this might be the philanthropics.

And it's also a fact that, due to the difficult financial and political realities, you need to be more focused on getting support from those rich and powerful. This has been clearly visible in the early stage of the Covid-19 response, with all these investment cases and new platforms created.

This is also a symptom of the financial crisis of the UN system and the reluctance of governments to pay for multilateralism, and at the same time it's a sign of the rise of philanthropy and the corporate sector and of their power and influence.

There would be a lot more to say on multistakeholderism. But let us get to the point, and the point is again engagement with civil society.

For us, it's a temptation. You know, we would like to be at those tables, and we would have things to contribute. And we also know that those multistakeholder platforms such as ACT Accelerator, they need to have us in the team. This is one of those tick-boxes: "Civil society representation".

But all in all, and despite some nice rhetoric and some existing good practice, the full involvement of civil society in the making and implementation of those partnerships and initiatives is too often neglected. Or it is done in an improvised or tokenistic way, as a recent study of the Oslo University has shown.

And this should be a matter for WHO, as some of these partnerships are either in your house or they have you as core partner in their governance structure.

So yes, let us talk about the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator, but let us also look at other platforms, such as the "Global Action Plan" that you set up other multilateral agencies, and I am happy that there are some colleagues who can tell these stories much more in detail.

**On concrete steps and in particular the proposal of a "WHO civil society commission"
(reacting to a question by Dr Tedros)**

There are two main ingredients to bring this really to a next level: One, you have to put engagement with civil society at the core of the institutional culture of WHO. You know, you have succeeded easily in doing so with making WHO a gender aware organization. It would now be the moment to insert a culture of doing it better with civil society.

And then this needs to be set up. The idea of a commission would be a kind of an interface between civil society, Member States and the Secretariat and the Regions on all what is to be done.

If this is too big, start smaller. For example, set up, within the secretariat, a civil society desk, very simply. Somebody, one person, who becomes our friend, our partner within the WHO, and who is not only allowed but explicitly mandated to promote the cause of civil society engagement, to open up doors for us and to provide us with some very practical things.

So your leadership is great. An institutional culture shift is needed, and then this has to be translated into structures, and into responsibilities and into some mechanisms to really follow-up.

...and, being requested by Dr Tedros to be more concrete on the proposed Commission:

We have not yet started dreaming and making plans for it. We needed to know your reaction. But if we look at how the Handbook project was set up in a team with the Secretariat, with Member States, with civil society, this could be the format for going the next step: to have such a mixed

commission of what Justin, in his introduction, framed as a triangle. But, you know, WHO is more than one side of the triangle, because you also have the Regions and the countries to involve.

We would be there, and our challenge – and we will discuss this challenge in a separate meeting to which we will invite in two weeks – is really how to get organized ourselves, to make sure that we do not always have the usual suspects at the table with you, that issues of representation within civil society and the whole challenge around good governance and management are addressed. But this is something we have to look at in detail among ourselves, if we see a direction coming from your side.

References (put in the chat box)

- WHO Civil Society Initiative (2001): See review report: WHO's interactions with Civil Society and Nongovernmental Organizations
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<https://academic.oup.com/heapol/article/33/8/928/5085423>
- Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-Being for All (GAP)
GAP Website: <https://www.who.int/initiatives/sdg3-global-action-plan>
Civil society assessment: <http://www.medicusmundi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/GAP-paper-July-2020.pdf>
Upcoming webinars: <https://www.medicusmundi.org/kampalawebinars/>
- Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A)
Website: <https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator>
Civil society concerns: <https://www.globalfundadvocatesnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Civil-Society-Community-Engagement-in-the-ACT-Accelerator-ACT-A.pdf>

Contact: Thomas Schwarz, schwarz@medicusmundi.org
Meeting documentation here: <http://g2h2.org/posts/socialaccountability/Civil-society-input-paper-and-asks-for-the-dialogue-meeting>
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1QiuX0zUJs6qksokLn-KPQsm22apPtU8>



Dr Tedros, responding: “When I joined WHO, and when they briefed me about Non-State Actors, and since I came fresh from the Foreign Ministry, the use of Non-State Actors in Foreign Ministry was for terrorists. So I was wondering was this meant for WHO. So, yes, the name itself is a problem...” 😊

