



Global Social Observatory

Geneva, Switzerland

Brainstorming Report, 19 February 2016

Report on the Brainstorming Session, 19 February 2016

Highlights from 19 February 2016:

GSO has a unique multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder reputation.

The focus of GSO's activities should encourage multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral collaboration in support of the SDGs at the national and community levels.

The GSO should work with UNOG and others in the Geneva international scene to facilitate dialogue opportunities on various sub-clusters of SDGs.

The GSO can also contribute to an information-sharing platform for monitoring and dissemination of best practices, including new collaborative combinations, new skills and new actors.

GSO Background

The Global Social Observatory, based in Geneva, Switzerland, provides a neutral forum for multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral dialogue in search of common solutions on global social and economic issues. Its mission is to promote an inclusive and interactive dialogue and a search for common ground among diverse stakeholders from multiple sectors. The GSO operates with a statement of principles for inclusiveness that all participants are asked to recognize, and individuals or groups that do not agree with these principles are generally not participants in GSO events. The inclusiveness of stakeholders, then, has encompassed participants who have been willing to engage in this kind of inclusive setting but has not included groups or individuals who want to exclude others from the global dialogue.

But it isn't just the inclusion of diverse stakeholders that the GSO is committed to facilitating; it is also the encouragement of reaching across different sectors. GSO activities in its first ten years have focused on efforts to link up the sectors associated with health issues, workplace issues, workers' rights, gender mainstreaming, food security, sustainable development, trade, intellectual property, business and human rights and corporate social responsibility. Participants in GSO dialogues have also been interested in or are recognized experts in many other sectors, but these are where the GSO dialogues have been most focused.

A Series of Interactive Dialogues on the SDGs

Through a series of interactive dialogues, the GSO has been facilitating the search for a place where various actors can share and pool their strengths through collaborative networks to support a cross-cutting and multi-stakeholder approach to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Once it was clear that the 2030 Agenda would have 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets, the GSO focus has been on how to promote a Geneva role for developing multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder partnerships for the SDGs, starting with an interactive dialogue in collaboration with the UN Office at Geneva in April 2015.



Through the year, three messages have been consistently articulated – (1) International Geneva has an operational role to play in the diversity of technical expertise to support the SDGs; (2) support needs to be channeled to enabling country-level and community-based initiatives; and (3) that support can facilitate dynamic and cross-cutting linkages across the SDGs and other global summit commitments. And while the emphasis has been on sustainable development, the participants in the GSO dialogues have also been challenged to identify how one might encompass the overarching goals or themes of “peace, rights and well-being” that are so much a part of the International Geneva scene.

Looking to the Implementation of the SDGs

The most recent GSO dialogue on 19 February 2016 was a very informal brainstorming session that was nonetheless typically multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral. The goal of this session was to get to the specifics and articulate some concrete ideas about the GSO role in supporting those three consistent messages for (1) a Geneva-based implementation process, (2) for global support of national initiatives on the SDGs, (3) with multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder linkages. And because the year 2015 was pivotal in producing a series of global summits and agendas for the future, the participants were reminded that the SDG framework is just one such catalyst for future collaboration. The bigger picture requires the integration with financing issues (the Addis Ababa Action Agenda), disaster risk reduction (the Sendai framework) and the “INDCs” and related commitments to address climate change (the Paris COP 21 Agreement). It also means incorporating new issues, such as migratory and refugee trends.

As the participants observed, the focus on implementation is necessarily at the national and community levels. UNDP, for example, is adapting its “One UN” mandate at country level to support multi-stakeholder partnerships and multi-sectoral initiatives at the national level. The Geneva institutional network of technical expertise for operationalizing the SDGs will need to respond to requests for designing national platforms, sharing lessons and good practices and mobilizing inclusive and participatory monitoring and review. Global institutions are being challenged to create innovative platforms to channel expertise into these national initiatives.

GSO is clearly not alone in this endeavor – SDG “hubs” are popping up everywhere, including right here in Geneva. Geneva could soon become even a “hub of hubs”, although participants were warned that there is a “danger of the deflatable balloon” if there are too many of these “hubs”. In this context, participants asked the question to start with, what is the business case – at the GSO - for building a coherent and collaborative platform? Who cares? Without giving a direct answer to this for the world at large, the participants recognized that the GSO has developed a reputation for multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder networking that has been well received on past initiatives. The GSO should therefore start with its own priority setting among the SDGs and with identifying “the gaps” where bridges need to be built across the different SDGs. This is not a matter of trying to do everything but rather a matter of applying the unique networking approach of the GSO to unleashing the momentum of new stakeholder and sectoral combinations, including on themes such as gender equality that cut across the various agendas.

Facilitating Workable Cross-Cutting Combinations for the SDGs

The main thrust for the GSO should be to facilitate a prioritizing of potentially workable cross-cutting combinations of existing expertise relating to the different SDGs among the institutions in Geneva (or elsewhere) to link them together in multiple sub-clusters, as it were. Not just one or another of the



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17 SDGs; and not simply an overall coordination approach for ALL of the 17 SDGs. But rather, a place to encourage a multi-sectoral and clustered approach – such as health in the workplace with skills development and increased worker wellbeing and gender mainstreaming or nutrition-sensitive food security oriented as well to sustainable consumption and production and water resource management and fair trade in global supply chains.

This was an important message. Start with the gaps or the niches to fill the space in a cross-cutting way – not from the top down but looking around at where things are happening and identifying where broader engagement can make a difference. Certain of the SDGs were mentioned where a lead organization (like the ILO on employment creation in SDG 8 or the WHO on healthy living and its social determinants in SDG 3 or the FAO on food security in SDG 2) could benefit from some “matchmaking” across sectors, but it was also emphasized that the GSO should facilitate the articulation of “co-benefits” as part of the priority setting. Transportation, decent jobs, stability with health and/or food security as a focus area could benefit from a combination of priority setting and filling the gaps while giving content to the “co-benefiting” effect of collaboration. Participants observed that the GSO could and should engage in a mapping and prioritizing of these potential linkages and should build especially on its experience with the inclusion of the private sector.

Developing New Collaborative Ideas and Involving New Actors

Another entry point that the participants encouraged for the GSO was to serve as a catalyst for groups of non-state actors in their communications with the international organizations in Geneva – across sectors. Many of them bring skills, experiences and good practice knowledge but don't have a platform for communicating with each other or with the intergovernmental organizations. Similarly, there are many small diplomatic missions from developing countries who could benefit from such an information-sharing platform. The GSO could adapt its information-sharing record for keeping everyone informed and channeling this information from each entity. This may be especially useful as the process moves to addressing the challenge of how monitoring of implementation will actually work. While the UN system at large might play a role in providing a platform for partnership development and engagement with NGOs, the GSO could play an instrumental role as a neutral forum for an appreciation of the monitoring role of civil society, as well as multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder incubation of new collaborative ideas.

Two other angles for this collaborative perspective were raised during the brainstorming. One was the initiative from the NGOs in the Maison de la Paix for a SDG Hub building around SDG 16 on peace and security. Participants were reminded about the enormous significance of having such a goal to be included for the first time in the global development agenda. It was an important accomplishment to include this in the SDGs. The language of SDG 16 is: “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.” It was noted that an immediate challenge for supporting this goal has been the debate over finding agreement for strong measurement indicators, but the members of the SDG Hub for the Maison de la Paix are looking beyond this to supporting peace and security efforts throughout the SDGs. GSO participants, with their traditional orientation primarily to the challenges of combining social, economic and environmental development goals, learned something new themselves as they recognized the innovations that are being called for to fully incorporate this peace and security angle into the development agenda.



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The other was the growing recognition of the key role that municipalities are playing as innovators and incubators, especially on energy and transportation and climate change. The participants in the brainstorming session certainly incorporated an understanding of the importance of the national level for implementation of the SDGs, and there is a globally-oriented role for international Geneva for information sharing on the practical steps that can and should be taken to connect the learning from new actors, new skills, and new combinations to the national level. New skills and new actors are part of the mix, and they can benefit from a forum for learning and sharing. This is also a benefit that could accrue to the smaller diplomatic missions in Geneva, who can benefit from a useful information flow.

Conclusions

Step by step experimentation, hooking up with a major international organization and helping to identify and facilitate the opportunities for building multiple networks can be the way to go for the GSO to support this rapidly changing SDG-oriented environment. Of course, there is also the challenge of resources. It isn't yet clear how an expanded private sector role will be mobilized for either partnering or for new resources, including innovative financing models, but this suggests that the SDGs are still a very early work in progress. Multilateralism, platforms, hubs, linkages – they appear to have become clichés with little substance – but that does not mean that the GSO should stop doing its thing. It's time to work on the substance.

The GSO has a supportive network and a vision to bring sectors and stakeholders together to contribute to the building of substantive combinations of multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral linkages for the SDGs. And this clearly includes their connections, one might add, to the commitments made throughout the series of 2015 summits, whether on financing for development, on disaster risk management, or climate change – or, for that matter, the flexibility to recognize the many emerging issues that are being addressed in the summits and peacekeeping endeavors of 2016 and beyond.