



**Special Session of the 2015 GSO General Assembly
Challenges and Opportunities for Cross-cutting and Multi-stakeholder Partnerships:
Implementing the Commitments of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and
the Solutions Agenda of the Climate Change Summit
Tuesday, 23 June 2015, 10:30 to 12:00
World Council of Churches, Ecumenical Centre, Geneva, Switzerland**

The Global Social Observatory held its annual General Assembly on Tuesday, 23 June 2015, with a special session on “Challenges and Opportunities for Cross-cutting and Multi-stakeholder Partnerships: Implementing the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the Solutions Agenda of the Climate Change Summit”. GSO Executive Director Katherine Hagen presented the GSO perspective on inclusive dialogue while also featuring the lessons learned about the importance of trust building for multi-stakeholder coalitions to work well. The GSO President Deborah Vorhies welcomed lead discussants Salman Bal (Senior Political Coordination Adviser for the United Nations Office at Geneva), Catherine Bell (President of Graduate Women International), Stuart Orr (Head of Water Stewardship at WWF-International) and Peter Poschen (Director of the Enterprises Department of the International Labour Organization). The ensuing dialogue with GSO members and friends provided useful guidance on implementing this action plan.

The GSO Challenge

Katherine explained that the GSO has been convening multi-stakeholder dialogues for the past two years on the evolving architecture of the Sustainable Development Goals to follow on the fifteen-year commitments of the Millennium Development Goals. The current momentum is for a Post-2015 Development Agenda to have 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 indicators. The GSO has consistently encouraged dialogue across the SDGs for both cross-cutting and multi-stakeholder engagement and partnering to support their implementation.

This has been reinforced by the key messages and lessons learned from the GSO project, financed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to develop guidance for the prevention and management of conflict of interest among the multiple stakeholders groups of the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement. GSO reports to the SUN Lead Group identify a number of recommendations and lessons learned, but Katherine highlighted two here for purposes of this special session. First, it was quickly established in the project that any policy framework for the prevention and management of conflict of interest has to be implemented at the country level. This is where decisions are made about resources and alignments of stakeholders, and one can draw from this lesson that all of the SDGs will also require a country-level focus.

The second key point in Katherine’s summary of the GSO mission is that multi-stakeholder platforms need a policy framework of inclusiveness, transparency, and disclosure of the interests of each and every stakeholder. This framework is a precondition for the building



of trust among stakeholders that is needed for all groups to bring their skills and resources to bear on the common effort. Even then, there will always be conflicts among the stakeholders, some of which will involve conflicts of interest, but a process needs to be in place to understand what these interests are and to establish the procedures for managing them effectively for the benefit of the overall collaboration.

The GSO is well positioned to facilitate a series of dialogues on how the expectations for transformative partnerships in support of the SDGs and the Solutions Agenda of the Climate Change Summit can be realized through emerging networks of collaboration and partnership. The Geneva international arena is the foundation for this, and this special session is an opportunity for participants to share their experiences, suggestions and offers for sharing information for the next steps in advancing the overall objective of facilitating cross-cutting and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Check out the GSO website [here](#) for the evolving concept note and action plan.

Responses from Four Lead Discussants

- **Salman Bal, Coordinator for UNOG:**

This is the 70th anniversary of United Nations, and we are in a completely different age today than 70 years ago. We need to look at different ways of cooperation and partnering. This anniversary year is a pivotal year for partnering in connection with the major summits on the Post-2015 Development Agenda and climate change, but we should also go further to focus on risk reduction and prevention rather than responding to crises. This, too, is an important paradigm shift.

One of the strategies here is to make international Geneva more attractive by establishing different “platforms” to engage diverse stakeholders. One is the Geneva Internet Platform, and another platform on global health is in the works.

Cross-sectoral cooperation is a second challenge. How to bring them all together, both among multiple stakeholders and across multiple sectors, is an important question, and it is timely for the GSO project to be addressing these issues.

In addition to these general remarks, Salman raised a number of issues on the GSO Concept Paper and Action Plan which served to stimulate a dialogue with participants. To whom, he asked, does the GSO propose to make its “recommendations for platform development” or even for “models of platform development”? Is this meant to be recommendations to the organizations here in Geneva? To the countries? – To the agencies in the field? With regard to lessons learned from platforms already in Geneva, he continued, every platform is different, and each has a different dynamic. Peacebuilding was presented here as an example, along with the Geneva Internet Platform and the Green Growth Platform. So another question is which audiences are



you addressing and what are the lessons to be shared with others in the development of multi-stakeholder and cross-cutting partnerships?

- **Catherine Bell, President of Graduate Women International:**

A major challenge for partnering is how to integrate gender equality across the board and not treat it as a separate goal or silo. As we move from the MDGs to the SDGs, the challenge does remain to empower women and girls with consistent and expanding educational opportunities. We do know that evidence is well documented that women are better at working and collaborating for change, but we need to bring everyone into the group together to address the SDGs. We also need to set good cross-cutting targets and indicators, and we are grappling with how to set the right ones. It is easy to set indicators in a silo but how is gender affected outside the silo? We need to find indicators that have an overall impact on empowerment.

Finally, potential for conflicts of interest is something that we should be working on together. We should use the diversity of interests to bring people together. By looking for consensus on common objectives when bringing different interests together, including the empowerment of women and girls, we can create the dynamic for everyone to win.

- **Stuart Orr, Water Stewardship Initiative at WWF-International:**

We believe that the ultimate touchstone or benchmark for effective partnering on the SDGs is going to be experiences we have had for partnering on water, where we have been working for several years, long before the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

Thus, convergence among diverse interests isn't just to support the SDGs in principle. The success of effective partnering on water is based on a convergence of interests that drives the momentum because of the external awareness of a water-shortage crisis globally that is a big deal for everyone. WWF has been partnering with a wide pool of interested stakeholders who *want* to be at the table going forward because they recognize the looming crisis and see its impact on their particular interests. They are joining into partnerships because they support the "end goal" even though they approach this "end goal" with very different objectives.

Above and beyond the partnering on this particular compelling issue, we also see that multi-stakeholder initiatives are showing up everywhere. They are involved in sugar, industry, mining, fishing and agriculture – we are in the thick of multi-stakeholder initiatives. Among the lessons learned from our partnering experiences at WWF-International, there are two lessons that stand out. First, we recognize that it is important for all stakeholders to agree on the appropriate party, whether a third party or a recognized neutral party within the partnership process, who can lead the multi-stakeholder action and create its legitimacy. And second, we find that it is increasingly



important for someone to play a watchdog role to keep track of things like finance and ensuring truly effective access to data by all stakeholder groups. All stakeholders are needed, and the private sector is key, but there is a serious risk of “policy capture” by the private sector, and we need watchdogs more than ever.

- **Peter Poschen, ILO Director of Enterprises Department**

Conflict is built into the “DNA” of the International Labour Organization. The “enemies” of class differences between employers and workers have been translated into a dialogue between the “social partners”. This can be a model for multi-stakeholder partnering. However, the SDGs can be “quickly overwhelming “. There are too many goals and so none have any value. We switch them off because they are lost in translation, and it is difficult to mobilize around them especially if you are trying to build partnerships. There is, furthermore, a latent perception of conflict of interest between some of these goals. This is well illustrated by the tension in the goals for job security and sustainable development. If there is a real or even a perceived COI between one’s job and protecting the environment, then there is no choice. People will choose their job if necessary, and education about the importance of protecting the environment has not helped.

On the other hand, broadened partnerships are needed – and can be developed – to achieve both job security and acting to protect the environment. Examples include arrangements between employers and workers in the construction sector in Germany, who have worked out a major reduction of greenhouse gas emissions through very effective partnerships in the building sector. Similar experiences are being negotiated with donor support in Zambia.

Peter then offered two lessons from his perspective at the ILO. First, each partnership must address a specific problem. And second, the ILO experience is that governments are the only ones who can align all interests, because all other stakeholders have only partial interests. With these caveats in mind, he observed that the ILO is supporting numerous partnerships. One is the Geneva partnership on the green economy – an interagency effort by UNEP UNDP, UNITAR UNIDO and ILO. The ILO also supports the Green Economy Coalition, which is a complementary partnership that is operating as an important driver of change.

The Proposed GSO Action Plan and Participants’ Recommendations

Taking into account the observations from the four lead discussants, Katherine summarized the proposed GSO action plan (available [here](#)). A multi-stakeholder Steering Committee will be invited to oversee a process for developing and evaluating four new partnership case studies, building on an assessment of existing platforms and identifying new cross-cutting issues areas from among the SDGs. The GSO will prepare a concept note evaluating the partnering requirements and opportunities or each possible



partnership and convene an interactive dialogue to explore the challenges and opportunities. Outputs from this process will include a compilation of the common and distinguishing characteristics of successful partnerships/platforms; a basic methodology or framework for building successful partnerships; information and assessment on specific opportunities for other partnerships; highlighting the role of Geneva-based networks to support partnerships; and a preliminary data base for best practices on partnerships. Katherine also explained that this action plan is evolving in collaboration with other broader proposals for Geneva as a base of global support for national-level capacity building for the SDGs.

Participants at the special session came up with a set of 15 recommendations that will help to focus the proposed action plan.

1. Many platforms are already being developed – each one is different, but it is good to be developing these thematic partnerships – and scrutinizing how they are promoting cross-cutting and multi-stakeholder engagement.
2. Lessons can be learned from platforms already in Geneva. Every platform is different, and each has a different dynamic. Peacebuilding was presented here as an example, along with the Geneva Internet Platform and the Green Growth Platform.
3. Geneva has strong technical capacities in many fields and should mobilize them into cross-cutting and multi-stakeholder platforms, but it should only be a base from which to establish an information network with other initiatives and centres of technical expertise outside of Geneva, especially where Geneva does not have a concentration of technical expertise – such as the important area of energy.
4. The dilemma of how to promote cross-sectoral collaboration is an important challenge to address in this process and is linked to the dilemma of cross-cutting budgeting when line-item budgeting reinforces operating in silos. The GSO action plan could gather information on where resource mobilization has stimulated successful multi-sectoral collaboration, as with particular examples of national-level coordination to fight HIV and AIDS.
5. The measurement of indicators will also need to be cross-cutting in terms of their impact. There are goals, such as gender equality, for which this cross-cutting approach is essential but difficult to implement.
6. In any case, the Geneva initiatives should also be made relevant and supportive of the priority for review and follow up of the SDGs at the country level. As the GSO dialogues have already confirmed, there is widespread support for addressing the capacity building needs at this level.
7. The GSO experience with transparency and disclosure of interests among stakeholders is an important tool for trust-building to facilitate multi-stakeholder collaboration. It reinforces the recognition that each stakeholder brings



- different interests, which is in fact why partnerships are developed to combine these varied interests for a common “end game”.
8. It is understood, then, that there are different interests and objectives of each stakeholder, and partnerships happen because the stakeholders WANT to work together for a common end game. They see the need to do this, and there is therefore an important role for awareness building about the desirability of the end game for each stakeholder’s own interests or objectives.
 9. Partnerships or platforms need a specific purpose and an added value for each stakeholder.
 10. This also means a clear definition of roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and a constructive dynamic on conflict of interest.
 11. Where the incentives are not there or the stakeholders are not ready to work together, partnerships will not happen. This does seem to be the case on issues related to energy.
 12. Many partnering/platform experiences benefit from an active role for a lead agency as a neutral “third party” or “broker/facilitators”, who is able to establish credibility among stakeholders that have otherwise not cooperated with each other – or have even had conflicting roles on the issue at hand.
 13. Trust building among stakeholders may also require a strong “watchdog” role, especially with regard to the participation of private sector interests in partnerships or platforms. Participants agreed that this was increasingly important as private sector involvement has grown in these multi-stakeholder partnerships.
 14. In spite of the growing interest in new paradigms and innovative multi-stakeholder combinations, participants reaffirmed that there is still a key role for governments to play a leading role in these platforms.
 15. The potential is there for mobilizing many different kinds of stakeholders in Geneva that have not been collaborating with each other – the obvious dichotomy between the Left and Right Banks of International Geneva versus Financial Geneva was mentioned. It was also noted that sports federations are dotted along the coast with an accumulation of innovative collaborations, such as the collaboration between the Olympics Committee and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Conclusion and Going Forward

The question was raised at the beginning of this session: To whom does the GSO propose to make its “recommendations for platform development” or even for “models of platform development”? Is this meant to be recommendations to the organizations here in Geneva? To the countries? To the agencies in the field? The response to these questions should be an inclusive and participatory one. The GSO is itself a facilitator for multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral dialogue and a place for participants to search for common solutions. It is for them as participants to benefit from the learning process and



to take the lessons learned to the organizations in Geneva, to the countries, and to the agencies in the field.

Finally, participants encouraged the GSO to serve as a repository of information on cross-cutting and multi-stakeholder partnerships and platforms. Several participants identified sources of information that they offered to share for this common collaborative effort. This should even include information on where partnerships have not worked. The GSO welcomes these offers and the opportunity to build a data base as the foundation for a continuing process of learning about the complexities and new paradigms of multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration. The GSO thanks the lead discussants and the friends and GSO members who participated in this special session at the 2015 GSO General Assembly. It is agreed that the GSO Action Plan on 2015 Challenges and Opportunities will benefit from their participation and guidance.