



Civil Society in the new Century

What is CIVICUS? Established in 1993, this South Africa-based organization works to strengthen citizen action and civil society throughout the world, especially in areas where participatory democracy and citizens' freedom of association are threatened.

For three days in September 2011, over 800 delegates from 90 countries gathered in Montreal, Quebec to attend the tenth CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation World Assembly. Under the conference theme, “Acting Together for a Just World”, the conference’s underlying discussion concerned the evolving role of civil society in bringing about lasting social change.

Of particular interest to governments is that as civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to grow, and take a larger portion of the policy space, they can also play a significant role in bringing about revolutionary political change, as was the case during the “Arab Spring”. The next big step is for CSOs to participate in the post-revolutionary building of accountable and transparent institutions within these countries.

Combined with the technological ability to communicate regardless of geography, political barriers or socio-economic status, CSOs are addressing the challenge of how to bring previously marginalized people into the center of global decision making.

CSOs are acting as a legitimate counter-veiling force to governments and other public

institutions, through actions like “shadow reporting” (e.g. providing reports to international advisors of ‘on the ground’ human rights conditions in their home country).

Significant questions arise from this, such as what does the increased policy space occupied by CSOs mean for traditional roles and responsibilities of different societal actors (e.g. government, private sector, citizens, and consumers) in achieving the public interest? If not by government, how and where is the public interest defined and achieved? Can and should government’s role change in response to changes in the roles of other actors? These developments are important for Policy Horizons Canada in the context of our Policy Levers Foresight Study, which is exploring how the tools that different societal actors use to achieve a desired goal or objective are set to evolve over the next 10-15 year period.

As the strength and number of non-state actors increases, and as information is further democratized, the push for new models of accountability to be created and implemented seems set to continue to grow in the near future, intensifying the pressure on governments to adapt.