Constructive engagement

The Commonwealth Foundation is a development organisation with an international remit and reach, uniquely situated at the interface between government and civil society. We develop the capacity of civil society to act together and learn from each other to engage with the institutions that shape people's lives. We strive for more effective, responsive and accountable governance with civil society participation, which contributes to improved development outcomes.

Introduction

A fundamental component of the Commonwealth Foundation's programme is the facilitation of learning between and among civil society organisations.

A partners learning exchange workshop was convened in London in June 2014 designed to provide an opportunity to reflect and learn about different approaches to constructive engagement with governance institutions. During the workshop, a facilitated panel 'conversation' on constructive engagement strategies was held.

This is the first in the series of Commonwealth insights that draws on that learning exchange as a contribution to current practice.

Panellists included:

Emmanuel Gotora, Lead Organiser for East London, Citizens UK

Paul Okumu, Head of Secretariat, The Africa Platform

Ranja Sengupta, Senior Researcher, Third World Network, New Delhi

12 key insights

1. Constructive Engagement: A definition

Constructive engagement is an approach to advocacy for social change and transformation that seeks a reciprocal relationship between civil society and institutions in governance based on mutual respect, trust, legitimacy, transparency and competency.

It implies that the State, the dominant actor, but also other powerful decision-making bodies such as corporations and institutions recognise that civil society organisations (CSOs) are independent development actors in their own right, and offer a wide range of expertise and experience in development solutions and innovation.

It also recognises that CSOs are themselves a reflection and representation of the voice of the citizenry, and so engagement with civil society organisations is by extension a dialogue with society. CSOs also play a role in facilitating access to society voice in an objective manner that governments cannot, and so constructive engagement with CSOs offers this space to the governing.

For engagement to be constructive and meaningful, policy dialogue and consultation should be regular or institutionalised, with the necessary information being shared well beforehand and following a process that allows for genuine participation, two-way exchange of perspectives and knowledge as well as a report back on any follow-up action.

CSOs should always adhere to the principle of accountability to larger society and CSO constituencies, not just to themselves, their own institutions or their networks.

Constructive engagement should be seen as an essential element of an effective partnership between governance institutions and CSOs, not as an attempt to support government or even becoming the technical arm of governance institutions.

2. Relational power

Relationship-building is key to constructive engagement. By developing effective links, networks and trust based relationships with a range of stakeholders - media, business leaders, government officers, policymakers, members and constituents - CSOs can better engage with policy processes. Only with strong relationships can meaningful change be effected.

CSOs need to make the most of existing links by getting to know other actors and working through current relationships and coalitions.

Diplomatic skills based on principles and beliefs adhered to by the civil society being represented becomes essential to an effective network building, especially with highly political governance institutions.

Networks can also help CSOs that are not focused on advocacy, such as research-based or service oriented organisations, to join in with policy processes. Identifying key personalities and key entry points can help and make change is important when deciding who to include in networks.

> "We use the trust we have to expand the relationship beyond the individual."
>
> Paul Okumu,
> Head of Secretariat,
> Africa Civil Society Platform

3. Understanding common self-interest

To build networks and relationships with key people in power, an important approach in relationship-building understands common self-interest. It is important to remember that your target individual (government officer or politician) is a person who has likes, dislikes, and is affected by external and internal personal and work related pressures. All these shape interests. Understanding the self-interest of the person you want to influence is helpful to your engagement because it is the fundamental priority underlying the choices individuals make.

Understanding what drives an individual and finding common issues of concern can be an effective way of making a connection with people and improving the process of negotiation. And building on this to broader societal interest. This is an important aspect of research for constructive engagement.

4. The challenge of representation

Being representative is a key ingredient for constructive engagement but is often difficult for CSOs and alliances to achieve particularly when their constituents are not organised.

Alliances, coalitions, network organisations and platforms need to be organised and representative. It is often understood that a crucial source of your organisation's legitimacy and therefore its influence, is its representativeness. But how can CSOs truly be representative? Involving constituents in the decision-making and position-setting of an organisation and in playing a lead role in identifying and deciding what issues will be addressed in advocacy, are some ways to ensure that organisations represent their membership.

> "If we're alone in the corridors of power, with none of our people present around the negotiation table, we're misrepresenting people. We need to make sure that our representative voices are heard. We aren't their voices."
>
> Emmanuel Gotora,
> Lead Organiser, Citizens UK

Key questions from the panel to reflect on

• Are you bringing the voices of your constituents to the table or are you being the voice of your constituents?

• How are your constituents involved in determining the issues that your organisation decides to take action on and advocate about?

• Do your members feel that you represent their interests?

Points to consider

• Focus on technical and political competency as your legitimacy rather than the masses that you represent. Show that you have the needed political power, capacity and competency to help the governance institutions bring the broader change that you are advocating

• Objectivity as source of legitimacy: Show that you have no hidden political interests in the affairs or policy issue that you are pushing. The best way is to be transparent about your source of support, your work and your motivation

5. Being organised

The panel talked about 'being organised', but this was not discussed explicitly as a strategy. What does being organised mean?

Being organised is premised on the fact that disorganised people and loose alliances have least power and organised people and strong alliances (or coalitions or platforms) have more power. In practice, being organised refers to a structure and way of working with the members of your alliance that is democratic and transparent. Decision making should aim to be non-hierarchical and inclusive with the aim of distributing power within your coalition or alliance.

Organised alliances meet frequently, are open to newcomers, are well respected, have dynamic leaders, and are in regular consultation, reporting back and bringing issues from all perspectives of their members.

In negotiations and advocacy activities, organised groups present a united voice. This often means that everyone has a role; roles are agreed beforehand and during the negotiation there is frequent consultation, affirmation of the next steps and evaluation of how to improve.

Relational power, being representative, understanding common self-interest and understanding the language of policy are all important aspects of being organised. Alliance leaders, among other things, need to intentionally strengthen their understanding and relationships with members, encourage new members, work collaboratively, empower members, share information and involve members in visioning, goal setting and strategising.

6. The language of diplomacy

CSOs are often hindered in their constructive engagement by a limited understanding of policy processes and the incentives and constraints that influence key actors and institutions. Rigorous assessment of political contexts and policy processes is essential.

Apart from the specific policy context, it is important for CSOs to know the macro political context and the way policies are implemented. They should bear the following questions in mind:

• Who wants change to happen and why?

• What evidence exists to support the case for change?

• How do policy decision makers see civil society?

• How does the policy making process really work?

• What are the decisive moments in the policy process going to be?

• Who makes policy and what influences them?

7. Keeping an eye on the target: who decides and what to ask

Sometimes it is very unclear who the decision-makers are and who to target. However, finding out who can say yes or no, or who has the power to influence that decision is critical, otherwise CSOs spend time and money lobbying governance representatives who are powerless and can't change anything.

A power analysis is a crucial first part to a constructive engagement strategy.

• Who has the power to say yes or no?

• Does power lie in the formal structures? If not, who has it and why?

• How do people with power relate to each other?

• Who do they relate to in your organisation?

> "Sometimes CSOs don't know the language of policy. It's important for civil society to do its homework."
> Ranja Sengupta
> Senior Researcher, Third World Network

Key questions in a power analysis

Based on its work in mobilizing civil society in the United Kingdom - particularly in areas where people have not engaged constructively with institutions, Citizens UK offered a checklist of key questions as a tool for power analysis:

- • Who are the people with the most relational power?
- • Who are the people with the most money power?
- • What are the significant relational groups of people? Who leads them?
- • What is the official decision-making structure?
- • What is the real decision-making process?
- • Where are you (your organisation) in these structures and processes?
- • What are your most significant relationships inside the institutions that you've identified? Do you have relationships with the most powerful people?

It is important to remember that we don't have all the answers so we need to intentionally work it out. Follow the power and work there.

8. Finding winnable, tangible actions or asks

Campaigns should be run in a positive way. It is important to be for and not against something. Identify the collective self-interest and target winnable, tangible agreements while working towards the bigger policy change. This approach helps energise constituents, build trust and maintain the momentum of campaigns.

9. Negotiation: The currency of engagement

To engage constructively and achieve social change, it is vital for CSOs to be prepared to negotiate and be clear about their terms.

Civil society organisations should think about the self-interest of target groups and individuals. Putting oneself in another's shoes can help build a relationship and demonstrates respect as well as forethought.

Preparation is important and before any meeting that forms part of a negotiation, a plan and a fall back plan should have been agreed along with roles for everyone participating. Practice (role-play) beforehand and be prepared to compromise to stay in negotiation. Keeping values and principles in mind will help if compromises have to be made.

Get agreement on something before leaving the meeting, even if it is only the date for another meeting to follow up your discussion.

10. Confidentiality and transparency: not an oxymoron

As advocates, it is important to be clear about the line between confidential relationships, working confidentially and working in secret.

Sometimes the distinction can be unclear, but it is important to remember that when building relationships with people in public office, CSOs need to act appropriately.

Although they may be building relationships in private, the questions asked and the information gathered must always be focused on connecting with the organisations' public role. They are seeking a public relationship and must be transparent at all times.

11. Energising leadership, building new leaders

Advocacy often takes a long time to achieve change (although the opposite can be true in some contexts) and many CSOs face the fatigue of membership to maintain the momentum of a campaign.

Refreshing the leaders, bringing in new people, energy and ideas into a network can help to keep constituents energised. It is important to always be on the lookout for people who show leadership potential, including those from among the youth.

An effective leader does not have to be someone currently in a leadership position but someone who can build relationships with a diversity of people, communicate well in public and negotiate with power. One way to build this is to constantly do a leadership analysis within the group/organisation and identify key roles. There are those who are great connectors, but are not likely to be good at strategic guidance. There are those who easily build relationships, but cannot sustain them. Use each member appropriately and avoid relying on one individual or a set of individuals for all the roles.

12. When to be visible and when to stay invisible?

Civil society leaders need to judge when it is best to 'claim' an idea or role in a policy change. To maintain relationships with people in power, civil society may need to 'time' its visibility strategically or step back if, for example, government wants to take credit for a policy change. Discussing and agreeing when to be visible can be part of the negotiation.

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