

Civil society strategies and the Stockholm syndrome

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Larry Lohmann's 'Beyond Patzers and Clients' in this volume is brilliantly provocative and – in my opinion – entirely accurate. Larry's piece is especially relevant now that we are on the other side of the tragic trilogy of climate change conferences (Copenhagen, Cancun and Durban) and the rueful Rio+20 conference on sustainable development last June. I'm left only to add some anecdotes.



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Seeing UN negotiations as a game of chess with masters and 'patzers' is illuminating. Larry challenges us to identify who the patzers are: the naïve civil society organisations (CSOs) thinking they could pull ahead on the carbon emissions scorecard by accepting carbon trading as part of the Kyoto deal? Those of us who have expended energy challenging false solutions in UN fora, when we could have been resisting the causes of climate change on the ground? Larry's analysis leads me to reflect on my own organisation's choices in trying to bring societal change. Having spent my life as an activist within a civil society organisation, working both in UN corridors and in collaboration with social movements on the ground, I am firmly convinced that substantial change and real solutions to our most pressing problems – food, fuel and climate – will not originate from governments (or from UN agencies), but from civil society/social movements. Institutions will never move far enough or fast enough without the political pressure from demands by peoples and social movements. So what are sensible and responsible strategies for an organisation like mine? When are we patzers and when are we agents for real change?

I stayed away from the 1972 Stockholm UN Conference on the Human Environment, believing that the problem of ecological mismanagement was secondary to the greater problem of injustice. Twenty years later, at the first Rio Earth Summit, ETC Group, the organisation I had been working with since the late 1970s (then named RAFI) saw no point in attending either, and even argued that the proposed Convention on Biological Diversity could end up institutionalising (and legalising) 'biopiracy'. We were no more optimistic about the prospects for the

World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg 10 years later (Rio+10), but this time we participated – not to engage with governments, but to talk to civil society partners and social movements. We saw an opportunity to reach a large and mixed set of actors to discuss the growing threats from a round of ‘silver bullet’ technologies being proposed to address our social-environmental problems.



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En route to Johannesburg, we warned our allies about the ‘Stockholm Syndrome’ – a kind of psychological dependency that, back in 1973, had led clerks in a bank in Sweden’s capital city to ‘fall in love’ with their bank-robber captors after being held hostage for six days. We insisted that CSOs had been vulnerable to the Stockholm Syndrome even at the 1972 Stockholm Conference and that the vulnerability had only escalated in the subsequent three decades of major UN conferences. Civil society had, to a considerable degree, become camp-followers to UN environment and development jamborees – in essence, the ‘clients’ Larry describes – waving banners on the margins, but simultaneously legitimising largely inadequate or even dismal agendas where few real problems were being tackled. If the UN threw a party and CSOs didn’t come, there would be no party, we argued. Our absence would be felt more profoundly and have more impact than our presence.

‘Stopping the Stockholm Syndrome’¹ by calling for a CSO boycott of the WSSD was more rhetorical device than practical strategy. We knew how many CSOs had already RSVP’d, and their funders, in large part, expected them to be there. In addition, there was a small number of organisations immersed in the policy processes, trying to influence decisions usefully and effectively, or simply to execute ‘damage control’. But the point we were trying to make – that CSOs should stop being complacent and complicit – was, and still is, relevant. In ETC Group, we have found ourselves swinging from engagement with those outside the official negotiations in order to mobilise action on fundamental issues (such as terminator technologies) to lobbying those inside the process to make small, but concrete policy interventions. We know we’re not immune to the Stockholm Syndrome; we have felt the risk of slipping into a patzer/client role, to use Larry’s terms.

Two years before the Rio+20 summit in 2012, we concluded that geopolitics dictated nothing Earth-shattering would come out of the conference. But ETC Group went anyway. Governments, we thought, had found themselves on board an unstoppable train headed for Rio, compelled by the niceties of a ‘+20 Summit’. Most of them, however,

¹ See also the article ‘Stop the ‘Stockholm Syndrome’!: Lessons learned from 30 years of UN summits’ in the What Next Volume I. (Mooney, 2006). http://www.whatnext.org/Publications/Volume_1/Volume_1_main.html

clearly didn't want to be on the train; they couldn't get off and they knew they would need to produce some kind of outcome – for most of them, the less consequential the better – in order to avoid an obvious and embarrassing wreck. If civil society organisations could come up with a short, realistic and strategically useful list of initiatives, we reckoned, the G77 and the EU might be influenced, or even attracted, into taking some of them on board. We decided it was worthwhile to go for the proverbial 'low-hanging fruit' – initiatives that cost little or nothing; proposals with plausible precedents; restructuring that might slip below the right-wing radar. Rather than asking for lofty (but in the end empty) financial commitments or seismic institutional shifts, we focused on a small number of what we considered concrete, useful and achievable gains – no trumpets or treaties.

As anticipated, Rio+20 was an abject failure in effectively addressing the crises of climate, environment and development. We didn't get much either, but what we got – pieces of text here and there – provides us with clear political targets and spaces to manoeuvre.

One of the gains relates to the global governance system itself. With the three most recent climate change conferences in mind – specifically, their steady erosion of transparency and inclusiveness – explicit support at Rio+20 for the newly restructured UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS, established in 1974) as the central policy-making body on global food and agricultural issues was indeed welcome.²

In light of Larry's article, this may be an issue of considerable relevance. What does it take to set up a governance structure at the global level, which allows progressive civil society organisations and, even more importantly, genuine, broad-based social movements to participate effectively in the decision-making process without getting hoodwinked into patzer blundering or Stockholm syndrome victimisation?

In the midst of a food crisis and as a result of civil society's considerable engagement, the CFS was restructured in 2009 to allow civil society, peasant, indigenous peoples' and farmers' organisations to participate in negotiations effectively rather than nominally. In particular, the creation of the self-organised 'Civil Society Mechanism' makes it possible for

2 Our reference point in the Rio+20 outcome document, 'The Future We Want', is paragraph 115: 'We reaffirm the important work and inclusive nature of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), including through its role in facilitating country-initiated assessments on sustainable food production and food security, and we encourage countries to give due consideration to implementing the CFS Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security. We take note of the on-going discussions on responsible agricultural investment in the framework of the CFS, as well as the Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment (PRAI).'

CSOs to identify key spokespersons on each CFS agenda item under rules that now let CSOs intervene with much the same flexibility as governments. Most notably, the Civil Society Mechanism has yielded priority to the participation of small-scale producers. The CFS is bolstered by a relatively independent High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) capable of initiating studies on controversial topics (land grabs, commodity speculation and climate change, for starters) that are then discussed by the CFS.

The CFS process isn't perfect – control of its Secretariat and budget remains too closely tied to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and some of its HLPE reports have got higher marks than others, for example – but its high level of debate and inclusivity provides a model for other UN bodies and, indeed, the CFS model is under active consideration in other UN fora. Nonetheless, in multilateral diplomacy, every opening is also a target, and the future of the CFS – and any bodies made in its image – must be monitored carefully.

Another achievement at Rio+20 was the adoption by governments of language calling for a global-to-national technology facility that would include assessment – and an explicit acknowledgment that some new technologies could prove dangerous.³ (Given the active participation of the US delegation and the heavy emphasis, generally, on technologies and technology transfer as solutions, this was a surprise in itself.) The commitment to technology assessment was the result of civil society organisations taking on an important issue, where vested and commercial interests had not yet consolidated, and bringing it forward, framed in a way that made governments listen (and, in the case of a few key governments, to take leadership to help advance it). The existing policy void made it possible get a critical mass relatively quickly, making it difficult for any single country to take a countering position.

Of course, we know that any UN technology facility will never fully meet the needs of the people, and Larry's admonition – 'You know

3 From the Rio+20 outcome document (para 273): 'We request relevant UN agencies to identify options for a facilitation mechanism that promotes the development, transfer and dissemination of clean and environmentally sound technologies by, inter alia, assessing technology needs of developing countries, options to address them and capacity building. We request the UN Secretary General, on the basis of the options identified and taking into account existing models, to make recommendations regarding the facilitation mechanism to the 67th Session of the UN General Assembly.' (Para 275): We recognize the importance of strengthening international, regional and national capacities in research and technology assessment, especially in view of the rapid development and possible deployment of new technologies that may also have unintended negative impacts, in particular on biodiversity and health, or other unforeseen consequences.

you've been snookered when a deal you yourself helped make turns out to undermine your deepest goals and allegiances at every turn' – still rings in my ear (a less articulate version of it has been ringing in my ears for four decades). We know that active participation in UN meetings could become a civil society sinkhole sucking up people and resources needed elsewhere. However, en route to a technology facility, we think it's possible to create a relatively transparent forum for technology debate that also parallels peoples-based 'Technology Observation Platforms' (TOPs), established at local and regional levels to provide independent analysis of new technologies, which the UN will find difficult to ignore. Rather than falling prey to the Stockholm Syndrome, we would like to see the UN facility kept relevant and dynamic because it must continuously justify its actions and relate to other parallel, independent initiatives where civil society is fully in control.

Finally, Larry's evocative analysis brought to mind the years of FAO negotiations that eventually resulted in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture – aiming to keep the world's most important food crops essential for food security from being privatised. At the close of the first session of its governing body in 2006, civil society organisations brought forward a set of recommendations – calling for, in particular, greater participation from civil society and the setting-up of transparent monitoring mechanisms in relation to compliance with the Treaty. Then we presented an award to honour outstanding service.⁴ The prize? A 'Genetic Resources Chess Game'. Rather than the usual figurines, each chess piece represented a food crop that plays a crucial role in feeding the world's people. The game had its own set of rules, which were presented along with the set. The first rule was meant to underline how costly – when we're talking about issues of global concern, like food – 'patzer' moves can be: The game can only be won if all the pieces remain on the board.

Those of us who skirmish around the edges of the United Nations must be consistently challenged and made accountable, and we have to know that our 'gains' can easily turn out to be losses. We believe the most important work towards necessary and transformational societal change will be done in webs of social movements, but we also believe that CSOs – fragile but agile – have roles to play, if they play them well. The moral? We must always wonder whether, each time, we are the patzers or the patrons.

4 The first Herman Warsh Award for 'services to the genetic resources community' was given to Pepe Esquinas, then-Secretary to the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture and principal architect of the Seed Treaty.