



Learning from Experience: Activist Reflections on 'Insider-Outsider' Strategies

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spotlight

At a recent strategy session on “Gender Justice and Globalization”, hosted by AWID, a diverse group of gender equality advocates from different regions of the world discussed current threats to women’s rights.¹ They highlighted economic globalization and the increase in poverty and insecurity, rising religious and cultural fundamentalisms and militarism, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, conservative and autocratic governments and the ‘war on terror’. They also shared their thoughts on how to achieve gender equality, especially how women can take action to respond to the current global context and where they can have the most impact. Similar discussions about gender equality strategies are happening in the Feminist Dialogues leading up to the World Social Forum and at the preparatory meetings for Beijing +10, amongst other venues.

Women’s rights advocates have been and are using a wide range of strategies to assert their rights and call for change. They have found creative and effective ways to make themselves heard outside of official governmental or institutional processes. For example, ‘outsider’ strategies have included alternative events such as the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery, convened by NGOs throughout Asia when the government of Japan refused to hold official hearings. Women have also been ‘out in the streets,’ marching for reproductive rights throughout Latin America, protesting the World Trade Organization in Cancún, occupying oil company facilities in the Niger Delta, and filling the streets at peace rallies around the world.

Women have taken advantage of openings in policy spaces as well. Throughout the 1990s, women came together to make their voices heard at a string of United Nations conferences – insisting that “women’s rights are human rights” in Vienna, filling a stadium for the Women’s Caucus meetings in Cairo, and challenging structural adjustment policies at the Social Summit. The busy conference schedule also included the Earth Summit in Rio, the

Habitat conference, the Food Summit, the International Criminal Court conference in Rome, and of course, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Sharpening their drafting skills, women spent hours labouring over the texts of conference documents, raising ignored women’s priorities and inserting gender-specific language. They lobbied and negotiated, ‘alternative text’ in hand, to build support for stronger commitments to improve women’s lives.

As opportunities to participate in official policymaking spaces appear to be on the increase – with buzz about ‘civil society participation’, ‘citizen engagement’ and ‘multi-stakeholder dialogues’ – women are questioning how ‘insider-outsider’ strategies can be more effective and when ‘outsider’ strategies are our best choice.²

The controversy about the effectiveness of participating inside official policymaking spaces creates tension as activists plan their strategies. The current trend of ‘civil society participation’ raises many questions: Can civil society have a real impact cooperating with powerful institutions in the global policy arena? Are ‘insider’ strategies a good use of energy and resources? Does participation legitimize illegitimate institutions? Are activist agendas being co-opted and watered down by institutional bureaucracies? These questions flow from the ongoing debate about whether it is necessary to work with actors in the centres of power to achieve change or whether change results from building up strength and cooperation amongst those marginalized by existing power structures and social relations.

There has been a move towards global policy discussions that involve civil society along with representatives from international institutions, governments, and business. The concern is that global policy institutions are not responding to calls for transparency, accountability, and citizen involvement with a genuine interest in change. They speak of being open to

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participation in policymaking while continuing to resist policy implementation that would alter the status quo. Overall, healthy skepticism appears to be in order. The concern remains that “many institutions have opened spaces for participation as a way to silence their critics, offering little, if any opportunity for real influence on policies and decisionmaking processes”.³

By offering some thoughtful insights on ‘insider-outsider’ strategies, this paper is an attempt to contribute to the ongoing analysis of how gender equality activists engage with institutional change. This paper is based on interviews with ten activists who were involved in working to influence policy, either at the international or national level. Not everyone interviewed works on women’s rights or gender equality, but all have had extensive experience working within institutions or governments. There are, of course, many others with valuable experiences and insights. The thoughts from the advocates who were interviewed give us ideas of the central challenges and also ideas on how we can move our agendas forward.

Can we make meaningful change on ‘the inside’?

Activists contemplating ‘insider-outsider’ strategies in formal policy spaces obviously must weigh the risks of participation against the potential gains. There are no agreed standards for civil society participation: with every commission or conference or summit, to some extent “the wheel of civil participation has to be reinvented.”⁴ Activists must assess each participation opportunity to decide if it will be meaningful and productive. Will you have an effective voice in the discussions to be able to present your perspective? Do you sense a possibility for worthwhile gains, whatever your ultimate goal? (The goal may or may not be policy change. ‘Insider’ and ‘insider-outsider’ strategies may be useful for a variety of reasons: gaining legitimacy, creating political will for action, or other strategic achievements on the way to policy change and social transformation.)⁵

The Women’s Caucus process at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 is an example of a successful ‘insider-outsider’ strategy, well known among gender equality activists. At the conference, the Women’s Caucus became both an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ strategy, with roughly a hundred women actively engaged in the official negotiating process and hundreds of other women on the outside discussing and critiquing the process, working in regional caucuses to comment on the conference documents, and organizing street protests to bring attention to particular issues. The commitments to women’s rights in the Cairo Programme of Action were considered a significant success and the

Women’s Caucus was able to work within the UN system to achieve this result.

Anita Nayar was interviewed about the Cairo Conference. She facilitated the Women’s Caucus organized by WEDO (Women’s Environment and Development Organization). Anita affirmed how effective the Caucus was: approximately 60 to 70% of the final text of the Programme of Action can be traced to the work of the Women’s Caucus. Women were well organized and had been active in the entire conference process – from preparatory committee meetings to the final conference. They worked hard lobbying for the adoption of alternative wording that better promoted and protected women’s rights. When asked about the elements that contributed to an effective women’s voice, Anita emphasized that the success in changing the underlying framework of the population conference to focus on women’s lives and rights was the result of a number of processes around the world including women’s movements working with their governments at the national level in advance of the Cairo meeting. Commitment to the full process and detailed organization ensured that women had a strong voice.

In a similar way, the International Facilitating Group for Financing for Development (IFG) has contributed to the Financing for Development (FFD) process within the UN system. Formed after the International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterey, Mexico in 2002 (the Monterey Conference), the IFG is composed of international organizations and networks in strategic centres and focal points in the USA, Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa. When asked about the IFGs work with the UN, Rosa Lizarde, UN Liaison for the IFG, said that its aims are to sustain the momentum of the Monterey Conference and hold governments and stakeholders accountable for the commitments that were made in the FFD agenda. This addresses mobilization of domestic and international resources for development, international trade, development assistance, debt, as well as issues relating to “enhancing coherence, governance, and consistency of the international monetary, financial and trading systems.” A key component of the IFG’s work has been to provide effective space for policy debates where NGOs can present various perspectives on issues addressed in the FFD-related meetings at the UN. In this process, NGOs present policy papers at panels and at civil society hearings convened by the FFD secretariat. Rosa highlighted two such occasions in 2003 where an NGO paper was included as an official UN document for meetings of ECOSOC and the General Assembly. The IFG was able to use this to create the opportunity to get their perspective into the official discussion when it would not otherwise have been part of the considerations.

New institutional processes present challenges in assessing the benefits of participation, but in some cases they also present an opportunity to contribute to the design of the participatory process. For example, when the World Bank proposed the creation of the World Commission on Dams (WCD) to review the Bank's involvement in large dam projects around the world, the Bank worked together with civil society groups, the dam industry, and some government representatives to determine a process for the Commission. In the end, civil society groups were pleased with how the WCD process was designed and how it unfolded.⁶ When speaking with Patrick McCully of the International Rivers Network, he noted that overall the process was extremely successful, largely because of the independence of the Commission. The World Bank initiated the Commission's creation, but once the process was agreed upon, the Commission carried out its mandate as an independent body. Patrick believes that independence was crucial to civil society's effective input. Each of the different sectors involved had good access to the WCD secretariat throughout the process. The WCD eventually issued a report that criticizes World Bank practice and recommends a new approach to decision-making for large dam projects.

Where a participatory process is judged to be ineffective, groups have chosen not to engage and in some instances have publicly stated their reasons for staying outside. Concerned about a lack of influence, representatives from a range of organizations issued a public statement in October 2003 announcing that they would not participate in a civil society meeting with the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the private sector lending and investment arm of the World Bank.⁷ The IFC is proposing changes to its environmental and social safeguard policies and devised a consultation process for the proposed new policies. The civil society organizations stated they did "not believe that engaging under the current circumstances would be appropriate or worthwhile." Their primary concerns related to how effectively they would be able to contribute. They stressed a lack of adequate time to participate, the absence of essential information, and a failure to define key terminology in the proposed new policies. The statement also emphasized that the IFC's proposed consultation process "effectively excludes those very people whose interests are at stake" and the fact that the NGOs doubted "whether civil society's inputs will result in anything more than minor incremental changes to the proposed framework."

Choosing not to participate can draw attention to the flaws of an official process and combining this with an 'outside' strategy will in some cases result in more effective influence on the process inside. This was Yvonne Mahlunge's experience with the constitutional reform process in Zimbabwe. Several activists had formed the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) in 1997 to press the government of Zimbabwe for a constitutional review and in 1999 the government conceded. The members of the NCA and the government had a different vision for the set-up and

legal framework of the review. So NCA members were faced with a choice: join the government's constitutional review process or continue with their own process and create an alternative space for constitutional discussion. The NCA voted overwhelmingly to continue with their own strategy and stay outside of the government's process.

In her own personal case, Yvonne had been unilaterally appointed to the government's Constitutional Commission (without any consultation and with her appointment announced while she was out of the country). She turned down the appointment and stayed within the NCA process "for the simple reason that the framework within the NCA ... was much more receptive and conducive to women's needs." In contrast to the 13% representation of women on the government Commission and the relegation of gender issues to a committee on culture and tradition, the NCA required a 50% representation of women in officer positions ensuring women were in the NCA leadership, including Yvonne who was the Gender Secretary. When asked whether her decision to stay out of the government process was a concern about not being heard or about legitimizing the government's commission, Yvonne's quick reply was "both". She believed the government's commission would not give women an adequate voice and her presence would imply that women were meaningfully involved: "I had the sense as a young, relatively well-known and recognized activist in the country, I was being set up to legitimize – from the point of view of women's issues – an illegitimate process. Once I was in, then the government could point and say 'We have a young gender expert'. Well, no!"

As the constitutional redrafting process unfolded, the NCA prepared a draft constitution with women involved equally in the drafting process, women in the NCA and women on the government Commission worked together to produce a Women's Charter which was widely disseminated, and contributed to the government's draft constitution being defeated by referendum.

Another consideration for assessing the possibility of meaningful impact on the inside is the institution's history with civil society engagement. The World Bank set up independent reviews of its policies and operations – the Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative, the World Dams Commission, and the Extractive Industries Review. All involved some form of civil society participation. The World Bank has more recently created a Joint Facilitation Committee (JFC) which is purportedly "a joint World Bank – Civil Society working group committed to exploring transparent and effective mechanisms for dialogue and engagement between civil society and the World Bank at the global level".⁸ The first meeting of the JFC was held in October 2003 and the process is ongoing although the reaction from many NGOs has been critical.⁹

Civil society organizations have now had many years of experience engaging with the World Bank. Doug Hellinger,

Executive Director of the Development Group for Alternative Policies (Development GAP), a Washington-based NGO that engages in analysis, advocacy and action on development policy, feels that his organization's experience with the World Bank over the last ten years has demonstrated the limits of constructive engagement and that future strategies should be outside strategies only. The Development GAP coordinated the civil society component of the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative (SAPRI). Doug found that the World Bank officials had multiple reasons for engaging with civil society, "but in the end they seem to be unwilling or incapable of making changes," particularly in areas which affect members of their Boards of Directors and the powerful interests they protect.

The SAPRI review process was long, involved, intense and "messy". The Bank dragged its feet, was duplicitous, and eventually pulled out of SAPRI, doing "everything possible" to keep the final report from going public in the United States. While the

civil society network involved in SAPRI at times had direct access to World Bank President James Wolfensohn, Doug lamented that in the end Wolfensohn was unwilling to implement changes in policy and policymaking processes that required him to confront the interests of the US government, his Boards of Directors, or the resistance of World Bank bureaucrats.

This history of World Bank-civil society engagement shows how difficult it is to go up against very powerful, unaccountable, political and economic interests. Doug referred to the "power and arrogance of institutions that are essentially unaccountable, that have tremendous power, and that are used to pushing governments around, let alone little NGOs." He believes activists should be realistic about these challenges, about the political and bureaucratic constraints in achieving change at the Bank. During the interview, he emphasized that it is not only the SAPRI experience that has demonstrated these constraints, but also the World Dams Commission – where NGOs were pleased with a strong report, but the World Bank has refused to take action to implement the report's recommendations – and the Extractive Industries Review where again the Bank resisted implementing changes.

Doug notes that the engagement experiences with the World Bank have left a real cynicism about

these types of participatory processes, which is now a central issue in the development field. This is reflected in the statement from civil society groups leaving the IFC consultation process, noted above, where they acknowledged "a general level of frustration with World Bank's processes that are fundamentally flawed and closed to real engagement and meaningful dialogue."¹⁰ Looking forward, Doug said: "The challenge now is to use our experience as leverage to bring about pressure on institutions from the outside, because inside engagement with the World Bank is going to bring at best extremely marginal changes, in fact what we've seen in almost every one of the areas where engagement has taken place is actual backsliding, in terms of the projects being supported, the standards that have been used and the policies that have been put in place."

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Who sets the agenda? Can we use 'political moments'?

One of the risks with 'insider-outsider' strategies at conferences or through commissions is that activists can find themselves responding to opportunities to engage in the global policy arena

such that they end up working in a very reactive rather than proactive mode. Even where participation will be meaningful and gains are likely, taking advantage of these political moments to influence international or national policy processes may mean working on issues that the movement or community does not rank as a current priority. This disconnect can create tension with grassroots individuals and organizations.

Reflecting on her experience at the Cairo conference, Anita Nayar commented on "the gap between those working closely with official processes who see little steps as victories and those who don't see how some language in a text is a useful culmination of a year's worth of work." She talked about how the UN conference process works, narrowing down issues through the preparatory meetings. Discussions at the final conference are circumscribed to outstanding issues. Anita reflected how challenging the tension was at Cairo over the focus on reproductive rights. She observed that this could have caused a split in the movement, but that was avoided because there was enough understanding that gains were made and that there would soon be other opportunities for international policy discussion on women's rights with the Beijing conference the following year.

In discussions about the work of the International Facilitating Group for Financing for Development (IFG), Rosa Lizarde, commented that the IFG "has been working from one major meeting to another

major meeting” to monitor and contribute to the FFD follow-up process. They will continue to monitor what is happening at the UN and feed that information out to their regions and sectors, but in the future Rosa said they would like to look at a wider range of opportunities, particularly processes around global governance where the IFG could promote the FFD agenda and advocate for implementation.

Marlene Libardoni, Executive Director of AGENDE (Ações em Gênero Cidadania e Desenvolvimento / Action on Gender, Citizenship and Development) in Brazil, works closely with the executive branch of the national government and with the Congress, particularly women elected to the Congress. AGENDE works to advance women’s rights through the legislative process. In our conversation about the effectiveness and challenges of this type of strategy, Marlene acknowledged that to some extent the work can be reactive in terms of responding to the legislative agenda and the demands of legislators. Marlene then contrasted the work of AGENDE with CFEMEA, a women’s organization she worked with in the late 1980s and early 1990s. She said CFEMEA was almost always responding to issues raised in Congress as the focus then was on the constitution and the many regulations that had to be passed. Also, there were many international conferences at that time which raised issues at the national level. AGENDE has not had to work in the same way and, for the most part, brings its issues to legislators. Strategy and timing will still depend on external factors of course, such as the political context, the composition of the legislature, and the composition of the women’s caucus, but AGENDE takes a proactive approach.

Civil society engaged in institutional policymaking discussions run the risk of being faced with an agenda limited to ‘softer’ issues that will reduce any potential to influence real change. Similarly, institutions will tend to favour less challenging civil society proposals and ignore others, effectively narrowing the agenda. In an essay titled “Barricades and Boardrooms,” Jem Bendell points to how “[i]f one group’s proposals on a specific issue are less threatening to established centres of power than another group’s proposals, the former will receive less resistance and gain more support from those centres of power. Consequently, the success of one civil group in getting its objectives on the agenda can have the effect of marginalizing other equally valid agendas.”¹¹

Civil society representatives in policy discussions might also find their progressive agendas co-opted. The co-optation of gender language and ‘gender mainstreaming’ come to mind. Gender training, for example, “became the be-all solution” and an attractive “quick fix” in governments and global institutions.¹² Kathleen Staudt, in her essay on women’s activism in and with powerful bureaucracies, notes that “some of the most virulent bureaucracies, hostile to women and to budgetary redistribution more inclusive of women, adopted the gender terminology” without making any significant changes.¹³ When interviewed for this article, Indai Sajor,

a women’s rights activist and educator active at the international level, spoke of the World Bank and UN using gender language as ‘lip service’ to women’s issues, and gender units and offices as increasing women’s marginalization. She also expressed frustration about how women “got co-opted into UN processes” with reports to CEDAW and non-political diplomatic language in assessing national government’s progress in implementing women’s rights. Attention to the scope of the agenda and how powerful interests may be manipulating the agenda is crucial to ‘insider-outsider’ strategies.

How can activists on the ‘inside’ and activists on the ‘outside’ work together?

The point of civil society input into policymaking is to bring in previously excluded perspectives, especially those of people directly affected by the policies in question. Civil society organizations participating in official negotiations or consultations processes have a responsibility then to ensure that interested parties are at the table, that civil society participants are connected to the movements on the ground, and that there is a good prospect of a worthwhile outcome. Groups have developed networks and organized in ways that broaden participation in global policy discussions. Connections with movements and grassroots organizations strengthen accountability and give legitimacy to the negotiating positions of the civil society organizations represented in the official discussion forum.

Often civil society participation is organized as a coalition or network. SAPRIN (the Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative Network), the civil society component of the World Bank review of structural adjustment, had a twenty-member steering committee composed mostly of people from the global South. Doug Hellinger said they had “an elaborate system” of communication by e-mail and phone, with the full steering committee and the executive committee meeting by phone on a regular basis. The steering committee met in person on average once a year for a number of days. The network had regional centres and country programs that disseminated and gathered information from hundreds of groups at those levels. While there were language and translation issues that complicated and delayed communications, civil society representatives inside the review process felt they had a broad mandate for their work.

Working in a similar fashion, the International Facilitating Group for Financing for Development (IFG) has developed a network of umbrella organizations and groups. These networks and organizations represent regional interests as well as sectors such as trade unions, women’s groups, environmentalists, human rights groups, and the IFG is currently reaching out to youth and indigenous peoples. Rosa Lizarde commented that regions and sectors have formed their own networks on FFD agenda issues and work in different ways as they choose. Communication is facilitated by the network of



networks structure such that information can be disseminated widely and members can be kept informed of developments at the UN, at the European Parliament, at the international financial institutions, and on the ground in the regions and sectors.

Ensuring accountability involves connecting to other organizations and to the grassroots and also involves an analysis of power relations and participation *within* civil society organizations. The growth of advocacy in institutional and policy spaces privileges professionalized NGOs over organic social movements.¹⁴ It is important to be aware of this professionalization and analyze NGO motives for taking advantage of particular opportunities in the global policy arena. In an article on civil society and global policy-making, Lisa Jordan notes that “[w]eak ties to national and local organizations, and the specialized knowledge required in the global arena, can give some groups a feeling of privilege once they have gained a seat at the negotiating table.”¹⁵ Doug Hellinger expressed the idea that it is important to be watchful of institutional imperatives and NGO self-interest: “We’re all, as major NGOs around the world, a proxy for people who cannot be at the table – it’s very easy to convince oneself that something is important to do, but we have to hold ourselves accountable. If you see what you’re doing is making things worse, then use what you’ve learned in other ways.” In her article on *Civil Society, Community Participation and Empowerment in the Era of Globalization*, Marilyn Waring bemoans the “emergence and growth of civil society in international development” as the creation of “another monstrous layer between implementers and grassroots experts”.¹⁶ For the results of an ‘insider-outsider’ strategy to be effective, civil society organizations would do well to consider their connections to the grassroots and examine what their participation in policy discussions with international institutions means for those who are the subject of the policies.

Professionalization and internal NGOs power relations create an ‘insider-outsider’ dynamic within civil society. Professionalization results in more barriers to entry to the global arena: “To be an actor requires very high levels of education and mobility, proficiency in English and ideally other languages” states Lisa Jordan. She also notes that most of the thousands of civil society organizations that have been formed over the last thirty years and that closely follow global public policy are based in the global North.¹⁷ Politics within NGOs can undermine participation by limiting the effectiveness of networks and partnerships. In her essay, Kathleen Staudt insists that “[i]t is incumbent upon us to understand and

diagnose organizations and to act politically within and outside of organizations. Transformations are not made from air-conditioned offices, behind word processors alone. They occur through relationships with people, acting in alliances and coalitions that produce results with meaningful resource changes.”¹⁸

Insider successes don’t happen in a vacuum. A strong ‘insider’ process always needs a complementary ‘outsider’ process to keep the pressure up.

Other aspects of internal power relations include “who has access to information, who is well resourced, who is in close proximity to decision-makers, who has access to communication technologies, etc.”¹⁹ These considerations are particularly relevant for international collaborations. A number of those interviewed commented on how language differences can create significant problems with access to information and lead to exclusion or marginalization. When asked about how civil society representatives worked together in the World Commission on Dams process, Patrick McCully reflected on how the international reference group for civil society participation in the process worked extremely well together, but language was an obstacle. In particular, Patrick said it was difficult to consult with the Brazilian movement of dam-affected people which was one of the key players. They were mostly small farmers who did not speak English and who were rarely on e-mail. Their advisor, an academic contact, was often very busy and there would be lengthy gaps in the communication. Patrick speculates that “some fall-outs could have been avoided if we had put more effort into translating documents into Portuguese”.

Working together to keep the activist agenda focused and keep both diverse actors involved is very challenging, but can be worth the struggle for the eventual results. ‘Insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ collaborated to push a unified women’s agenda in the constitutional process in Zimbabwe. Yvonne Mahlunge explained that the women working with the constitutional reform process organized by civil society, by the NCA, realized that even though they disagreed with the women who had decided to join the government’s Commission, they needed to support each other. Yvonne described how a new organization – the Women’s Coalition – was formed to bring women together to discuss the constitution. Women would concentrate their energies on their respective constitutional review processes – government or NCA – and they would also meet

together as women to agree on a Women's Charter, an agenda they would push in both processes. Yvonne feels that this collaborative work was effective and the Women's Charter was one of the main achievements of the constitutional process. It was translated into the country's three main languages and widely distributed and it was an important part of the NCA's campaign to defeat the government's draft constitution in the referendum.

While the communication challenges faced in network and coalition relationships are by no means simple, most activists have some positive experience with collaboration on which to build. A more complex challenge for 'insiders' and 'outsiders' working together is how to communicate with people who are part of the bureaucracies.

In their conversations about 'insider-outsider' strategies at the UN, both Rosa Lizarde and Gloria Careaga mentioned their good relationships with the UN secretariats connected to their work. Rosa indicated that the IFG has worked closely with the FFD secretariat in holding civil society hearings prior to the ECOSOC meetings in 2003 and 2004 and the General Assembly meetings in 2004. This has been important to the IFG's efforts to inject NGO perspectives into official UN meetings. Gloria Careaga was on the Mexican government delegation to the Beijing conference in 1995. She is a feminist, social psychologist, academic and teacher with a particular focus on sexual and reproductive rights issues and sexual orientation in her advocacy work. Gloria said that at the conference she learned how important it is to be able to work closely with people in different positions, particularly parliamentarians and also members of the conference secretariat. She emphasized that strategically, it was important to establish relationships with the UN people organizing the conference.

Many activists see the potential advantages of working effectively with institutional bureaucracies. In her work at the national level in Brazil, while Marlene Libardoni established good relationships with women legislators, she feels that given the time and funds, it would be useful to be more involved with their advisors. As members of the civil service, legislative advisors do not change with elections. Marlene says many advisors are interested in women's issues and providing them with information and training would both support the advisors and make them effective allies for AGENDE in advancing issues in the legislature.

Alliances with people in government bureaucracies or the bureaucracies of global institutions can be strategically useful, but there are many obstacles to these alliances in both bureaucratic and activist spheres. Caroline Moser's ten years of experience working inside the World Bank from about 1990 to 2000 enables her to highlight some key issues. Coming from an academic background in social anthropology and gender planning, Caroline worked in the Urban Department of the Bank

on a specific research project examining the impact of structural adjustment policies on poor households. She said she had expected, and indeed had been told, that she would be able to contribute her gender expertise in the Bank, but that turned out not to be the case. When asked about her experiences inside the Bank, Caroline emphasized the constraints of the bureaucracy. Once inside, it was her position in the bureaucratic structure that defined her, such that her years of experience in gender equality were often not recognized and generally considered irrelevant. She encountered considerable resistance inside the institution – what was her authority to speak on gender issues when she did not have an institutional position on gender? People in the Bank's gender unit were the experts on gender and the ones with the leverage to promote specific issues and projects inside the Bank.

As she reflected on her relationships with gender equality activists on the outside, Caroline recognized that at the time, there was insufficient understanding of the complexity of the role of an 'insider'. She did not really fit in on the inside or the outside. From an outside perspective, her gender expertise was often seen as irrelevant because of the limitations of her institutional position. She was not useful for lobbying since she lacked an important institutional position on gender where she

could influence policy change on gender issues. Although she integrated or mainstreamed a gender perspective into her work throughout her time at the Bank, her work was not 'gender work' and the incremental shifts her work might promote were not often recognized. Caroline recalls that she was able to be an informal advocate, trusted by 'outsiders' to give an objective opinion on the workings of the Bank and advice on dealing with the

institution, but outside activists did not generally engage with her. On a personal level, people on the outside told her that "the Bank needs people like you" and it was "brave" of her to have taken on the challenge as an "insider". Nevertheless, she feels that perhaps more feminists could have shown greater commitment in recognizing the usefulness of her position on the inside and the potential she had to contribute through her role. She wonders if this support might have provided greater opportunities for her to have been more of a player on some of the gender issues they were attempting to advance at the Bank at the time.

Caroline was candid when discussing the challenges of going from the outside to the inside. The bureaucratic limitations were enormous in terms of institutional leverage and any questioning of the Bank's operations. There was a real climate inside of "what you can and cannot say, what terminology you use, and what you can work on." In the 1990s, there was particularly strong criticism and opposition to the World Bank's macro-economic policies and Caroline suggested that in this environment, the hostility against the Bank determined how activists perceived her and limited the possibilities for 'insider-outsider' cooperation. Her seeming irrelevance to

"Women need to get out of the UN process. We've been there too long."



women’s rights advocates and the hostility she at times received from them created distance. “The outsiders saw you as having betrayed them for working inside the institution and never really understood that the whole idea was that some people need to go inside an institution to influence it.” While on a personal level she thinks that some personalities can deal better than others with the difficulties and isolation of being on the inside at the Bank, she continues to insist that it is extremely important to have people working strategically inside institutions to try to shift the way policy works. Caroline emphasizes that “your alliances outside are absolutely critical if you are going to have an influence inside”.

The outside view of large bureaucratic institutions and the incremental change within them clearly effects how ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ interact. In her essay on women’s activism in and with powerful bureaucracies, Kathleen Staudt notes that advocates often hold onto a conflict model of relationships: “the conflict model ... is a model with consequences for insiders who toil at their struggle in those masters’ houses. ... A conflict model draws lines and polarizes friends and enemies. Its advocates keep pressing, painting historic images of horrific masters’ houses. Its advocates are reluctant to acknowledge change, for that change would diminish their critique. For insiders, for whom mainstream staff members rarely acknowledge their presence, the continuing polarization is disheartening.”²⁰ That is not to diminish the importance of outsider protest and sharp critiques or ignore the fact that institutions can promote a conflict dynamic in many ways, especially by failing to respond to concerns about accountability and transparency. However, it is worth considering how activists can press for change and find ways to acknowledge and support allies on the inside.

Developing means of communication and support between and among activists employing a range of strategies in different spaces may be particularly important. Among the activists interviewed, there was a general consensus that ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ strategies go hand in hand. Comments to this effect came up from time to time in our conversations. For example, Anita Nayar insisted that “a strong insider process always needs a complementary outsider process to keep the pressure on” and Doug Hellinger expressed the idea that the advocacy strategies on the outside help to create the space on the inside to make some gains. The conversations demonstrated a sense that ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ must at a minimum respect each other’s strategies and would do well to develop stronger links.

If the outcome does not result in change at the grassroots level or policy, is there value in participating in an official policy arena?

The effectiveness of strategies can be difficult to measure. The activists interviewed emphasized the importance of being clear on the goals of engagement and staying connected to the grassroots to evaluate the benefits of inside work. In the Cairo Conference and the World Commission on Dams policy processes mentioned above, success was measured by the degree to which civil society input was reflected in the outcome document: the inclusion of groundbreaking and forward-looking language on reproductive and sexual rights in the Cairo Programme and a strong, critical analysis of the World Bank’s practices regarding large dam projects in the WCD report. While the implementation of the Cairo commitments is an ongoing process and the World Bank has refused to implement the recommendations from the WCD report, the activists interviewed expressed satisfaction with their involvement in the policymaking process and felt that the significant achievements in the process were in and of themselves a valuable advocacy goal.

In fact, in the case of the WCD, the civil society organizations involved had made a conscious choice to push for a strong report even if that made it more likely that the World Bank would resist implementation. When asked about the outcome of the process, Patrick McCully said a critical report was decided to be preferable to a weak report that might be taken up by the Bank because it would not be very disruptive to do so. The civil society participants felt that a strong, realistic report might have more influence in changing attitudes and perceptions over the longer term and could gradually work its way into policy and practice.

Achieving change in power relations through civil society participation in the global policy arena is clearly very difficult and some question whether that is even possible within large, bureaucratic institutions that have been created to protect powerful interests. But by setting multiple goals and thinking long-term, activists may see benefits to particular ‘inside’ opportunities. In an overview on “assessing policy spaces”, Lisa VeneKlasen of Just Associates proposes looking beyond policy outcome: “Can the policy opportunity be used to educate people about their rights and the political process, and to build your constituency for the long-term? Although you may not have a real impact on policy, the opportunity to engage may stimulate dialogue and give your organizing efforts increased focus, public visibility, and credibility.”²¹

In the right circumstances, participation can set the ground work for future change and produce cumulative advantages over time. For example, women's participation in the UN conferences of the 1990s – Cairo and Beijing and also the Social Summit, Habitat, and the Food Summit – built capacity for future engagement. Several of the activists interviewed stressed the value of learning the process: discussing the issues, educating decision-makers on women's rights, building relationships with officials and other feminists, and learning from experiences in other countries. Gloria Careaga found herself very well prepared to wield influence as a member of Mexico's official delegation to the Beijing Conference. As a member of HERA – Health, Empowerment, Rights and Accountability – an international group with experience working at international conferences, she had access to many tools for lobbying and found she had a special position within the delegation because she had so much information on the issues. As an open lesbian and advocate for issues of sexual orientation and sexual and reproductive rights, Gloria planned to push these issues from inside the delegation and even when she and her fellow activists were not successful in getting specific language in the final document, she felt the real success was in having the discussion within the delegation. Gloria said it was the first time Mexican government representatives were really discussing these issues, were open and supportive, and she was able to play a key role in educating them. After Beijing, Gloria found that the government's perspective on sexual rights and sexual orientation opened up somewhat and the government began to talk constructively about these rights.

Gloria commented that many activist leaders and feminists who were NGO representatives at the Beijing Conference can now be found on official government delegations to UN meetings and in the national governments of their countries. She acknowledged that there are limitations to these roles, but she feels that in these positions they can be influential as experts and educators on women's rights. Anita Nayar saw a similar value in the UN conferences of the 1990s. She said the conference process was “a massive educational process for everyone involved”, not only in terms of sharpening advocacy tools and messages, but also in deepening understanding of the issues. Women's groups accumulated a lot of knowledge over this period and became the experts providing information to the delegations. Anita feels it was one of the best training grounds for women's rights advocates. Echoing Gloria's observations, Anita also talked about the many women whose first conference experience was the Cairo conference in 1994 and who were part of government delegations by Beijing in 1995 and the experts relied upon by the delegations. Many are now close advisors to their governments. Anita acknowledged that these women are a “privileged set”, but she said they are progressive and can shift agendas on the inside.

At the national level, AGENDE's work in Brazil demonstrates their emphasis on education and sensitization. When asked about the various ways AGENDE engages with the government, Marlene Libardoni spoke about providing legislators with reports and documents, offering seminars on particular issues, and advising ministries. AGENDE can also advise newly elected women on issues of process and highlight where they have opportunities to influence decision-making. Marlene said they can see the results of their work in proposals and amendments, and that this important work takes time.

How can we create spaces that have an impact on policy formulation and implementation?

In reflecting on their experiences, some activists noted that past successes cannot be replicated. Patrick McCully of the International Rivers Network said that after the World Commission on Dams and the critical final report, the World Bank is much more cautious about civil society engagement where it cannot control the process. He also said that there has been a backlash against NGOs such that they have less access and credibility at the Bank. Anita Nayar feels the energy of the women's movement in the UN conference system is gone. In the 1990s, the agenda was so vast and that the conference process “had its momentum, energy, creativity, its significance and people understood why they were involved”. Now governments are more often limiting how much they negotiate and the focus is on a few pages of resolutions rather than the creation of visionary agenda documents. Development GAP is moving away from work with the World Bank. “Engagement is a tactic, not a strategy,” says Doug Hellinger. The organization's strategies must be larger, with ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ elements, and they will learn from previous experience and move forward working in a different way.

It appears that many organizations and activists are reflecting on their work and their strategies: What are our goals? Can we work to have greater impact on the inside and if so, how? Are we clear on why we are participating or not? Inside or outside, can we effectively connect with movements on the ground and have broader participation and impact?

Rosa Lizarde said that the IFG is “trying to refine and assess and look at where we are now and how we can make a better impact”. They are examining where they have focused their work, how they can continue to work effectively, and how they might replicate some of their early successes in presenting the perspective of their network members within UN discussions. When asked about how they are considering to strengthen their work, Rosa responded that in addition to providing critiques and analysis, it would help them move forward if their advocacy work included more data on success stories, solutions, and what practical work has been done in the development field.



In Zimbabwe, women in the pro-democracy movement recently met to talk and strategize. Yvonne Mahlunge stressed how difficult it is to maneuver women's issues and present them as real political issues in the context of the current political crisis in Zimbabwe. By bringing together pro-democracy women, Yvonne and others aimed to create a space where women with the same values could discuss how they would raise women's issues in the pro-democracy movement. She talked about some of the strategic questions women are addressing: "How can we maximize our gains given the political space within the pro-democracy movement itself? Is this space sufficient? What strategies do we put in place to make sure we secure a higher representation of women? Is the current political culture, with its culture of violence, one in which women want to participate?" Yvonne noted that this is an ongoing process. This diverse group of pro-democracy women – from NGOs, grassroots organizations, political parties, trade unions, and the legal profession, among others – will meet again in coming months to work towards a strategy.

Gloria Careaga talked about the Latin American networks that work together in advance of UN conferences. These regional network feminists met to discuss their strategies for UN conferences such as Cairo +10 and Beijing +10. Similar regional discussions about gender equality strategies are happening through the Feminist Dialogues in advance of the next World Social Forum.

The World Social Forum (WSF) itself is another example of activists attempting to reassess what it means to be active in the global scene today. The first WSF was held in 2001. Atila Roque, a member of the Brazilian Organizing Committee for the WSF, says the WSF was created to offer a new kind of space: a space to enable organizations to share, to exchange ideas, and to critique neoliberal globalization from different perspectives. It challenged activists to work together in new ways. Atila spoke about how the WSF is still very much a "work in progress", but it has brought various actors together around a set of basic principles without requiring any sort of unified final declaration or campaign. The goal is to make the diversity of civil society and the range of alternatives to neoliberal globalization visible at the international level.

Atila emphasized that the WSF provides a space for connection between 'insider' and

'outsider' strategies. Atila sees the WSF as facilitating these connections which are very important for legitimacy, support and information. The 'insider-outsider' connections at the WSF have also created a space for activists to be challenged in their choice of strategies. Through connecting with others, they can reflect on what their strategy choice means for the overall movement. Atila believes that this interaction will encourage activists to think more about the implications of working 'inside' or 'outside' and, as a result, strengthen their actions.

Along with thinking about how to be effective, inside or outside, the activists interviewed often emphasized the need for patience. It takes time to be critical and reflect on your strategy and a long-term perspective is necessary for change inside large, powerful institutions. As one activist reminded us: "patient work can really give us meaningful results".

Looking forward – Thoughts on strategies for gender equality

In reflecting on experiences engaging with policymaking institutions, some of the activists interviewed questioned the current direction of the women's movement and tied together a number of the issues discussed above. Reflecting on the extensive policy work of the recent past, especially within the United Nations system, there were comments about a loss of momentum. Anita Nayar suggested that "if the energy is no longer at the UN, then we need to adjust, shift our strategy." Indai Sajor was more emphatic: "Women need to get out of the UN process. We've been there too long. It's been the focus for the last ten years."

Moving forward, what do the activists interviewed suggest? They emphasized becoming more visible and more political. There was a sense that the professionalization and thematic focus of international conference activities has sapped the energy from the movement. The activists saw 'getting visible' as establishing stronger connections between issues by linking women's rights to all areas of policymaking and also forging stronger connections with the grassroots by working with women and men to hold national governments accountable for implementing changes. Indai Sajor suggested a concrete example: "Connect women's poverty to the increase in sex trafficking. With all the gains in the 1990s at the UN conferences, women have been selling their bodies in increasing numbers on the border between China and Russia. The connections need to be made and the grassroots needs to be mobilized." Indai spoke about how the gap has

grown too wide between theoretical language or diplomatic language and the reality of what women are experiencing on the ground. She believes that ‘outsider’ strategies may be essential now to implement and consolidate the gains made through ‘insider’ participation in policy discussions.

If women are to continue working with the UN system, they need to be clear on the relevance of different types of strategies. Anita Nayar suggested linking issues and bringing ‘outsider’ strategies into the UN to make the discussions more political and contextual given what is happening in the world today. She suggested that the women’s movement could be more strategic in connecting with UN activities: carefully justify what events we should participate in, what we should bring to those events, and explain the issues that will be discussed and why. Anita also highlighted that support for national level strategies and ‘outsider’

strategies is essential to any work at the UN level.

Whatever strategies are chosen, a number of the activists interviewed emphasized that we need to be better prepared and be more knowledgeable about the impact of the issues. Activists, commenting on ‘inside’ strategies and on ‘outside’ strategies, said more concrete information about women’s lived experiences is needed for strategies to be effective, as well as useful examples of good practices. Gloria Caraega suggested that a truly global network could share a lot of information, especially national level information about what governments are implementing nationally.

These ideas focus on confronting the disconnect between social transformation and policymaking and reflect how gender equality advocates are thinking strategically about their work. Continued assessment and analysis as to how women can take action to respond to the current global context will be a part of the ongoing work for women’s rights and sustainable development in the years to come.

Endnotes:

¹ Association for Women’s Rights In Development “Gender Justice and Globalization: Report on the Women’s Rights and Economic Change Strategy Session held in Budapest, Hungary, February 5-8, 2004” March 2004.

² The terms ‘insider’, ‘outsider’ and ‘insider-outsider’ mean different things to different people. For the purposes of this paper, we have adopted the term ‘insider-outsider’ to refer to strategies that involve co-operative tactics between people pushing for institutional change from outside of policy spaces (e.g. through street protests, public campaigns, etc.) and people engaging in policy spaces. We are also using the term ‘insider-outsider’ to refer to strategies where people use their access to formal processes, but whose work is not necessarily defined by the official processes. Many activists use a combination of strategies in their work, and at times strategically go ‘inside’ to bring ‘outside’ views into critical spaces in an attempt to change systems and structures.

³ Action Aid, Institute for Development Studies-Participation Group, Just Associates, Making Change Happen: Advocacy and Citizen Participation, 2001 at p. 2. Available online at <http://www.justassociates.org/MakingChangeHappen.htm>.

⁴ Jordan, Lisa “Civil Society’s Role in Global Policymaking”, Alliance, March 2003. Available online at the Global Policy Forum: <http://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/intro/general/2003/0520role.htm>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ While pleased with the WCD process, NGOs were not as pleased with the final result. The World Bank has refused to implement the Commission’s recommendations. This is discussed briefly later in this article.

⁷ “Statement of Civil Society Organizations”, 4 October 2004. Available online at <http://www.50years.org/cms/updates/story/187>.

⁸ See the “civil society” topic on the World Bank website at <http://web.worldbank.org> which has a section on the Joint Facilitation Committee.

⁹ Bretton Woods Project, Meeting: ‘milestone’ or ‘millstone’ for Bank/civil society relations?, 17 November 2003, online at [http://brettonwoodsproject.org/article.shtml?cmd\[126\]=x-126-27489](http://brettonwoodsproject.org/article.shtml?cmd[126]=x-126-27489).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bendell, Jem *Barricades and Boardrooms: A Contemporary History of the Corporate Accountability Model*, (Geneva: UNRISD, 2004) at p. 50.

¹² Staudt, Kathleen “Dismantling the Master’s House with the Master’s Tools: Gender Work in and with Powerful Bureaucracies” in Kriemild Saunders, ed., *Feminist Post-Development Thought: Rethinking Modernity, Post-Colonialism and Representation* (London: Zed Books, 2002) at p. 62.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Making Change Happen, note 3 at p. 7.

¹⁵ Jordan, note 4.

¹⁶ Waring, Marilyn “Civil Society, Community Participation and Empowerment in the Era of Globalization”, AWID Spotlight, No. 1, May 2004 at p. 5.

¹⁷ Jordan, note 4.

¹⁸ Staudt, note 12 at p. 67.

¹⁹ Jordan, note 4.

²⁰ Staudt, note 12 at p. 65.

²¹ Lisa VeneKlasen, Old Lessons, Fresh Insights, New Strategies: Notes on Mapping Gender Equality and Economic Justice Strategies, paper prepared for the Gender, Justice & Globalization Strategy Meeting, Budapest, 5-8 February 2004, Appendix 3: Assessing Policy Spaces.

Activists Interviewed for this Paper

Gloria Careaga is a teacher and researcher in the Faculty of Psychology at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). Her work focuses on population and development from a human rights perspective. She was part of the Mexican government delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

Doug Hellinger is Co-Founder and Executive Director of The Development Group for Alternative Policies (The Development GAP), an economic-justice organization that for the past three decades has worked with its Southern partners around the globe on development, aid, reform of international financial institutions, and trade issues.

Marlene Libardoni is Executive Director of AGENDE - Ações em Gênero Cidadania e Desenvolvimento (Agende - Action on Gender, Citizenship and Development) - in Brasilia, Brazil. AGENDE promotes a feminist perspective in Brazil's political and social agenda.

Rosa Lizarde is UN Liaison in New York for the International Facilitating Group for Financing for Development (the IFG for FfD), an organization founded after the Financing for Development Conference in Monterey, Mexico in 2002.

Yvonne Mahlunge is currently a PhD candidate at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London. She is a lawyer, a founding member of the Movement for Democratic Change (the main opposition party in Zimbabwe) and a founding member of several human rights organizations in Zimbabwe.

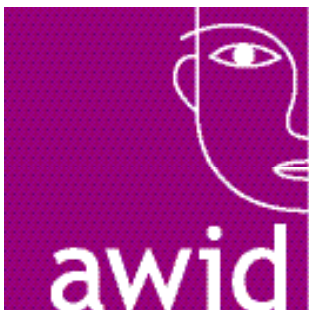
Patrick McCully is Campaigns Director with the International Rivers Network. Since 1992, he has worked on many dam-related campaigns and was a member of the World Commission on Dams Forum and of the Reference Group which oversaw the establishment of the World Commission on Dams.

Caroline Moser is currently a Visiting Fellow at Brookings Institution, Washington, DC. She is a social anthropologist and social policy specialist with more than twenty five years of experience in social development. From 1990 to 2000, she was the Lead Specialist for Social Development in the Latin America and Caribbean Region of the World Bank.

Anita Nayar is currently pursuing her doctoral research on the social and ecological consequences of the commercialization of indigenous medicine in India. In 1999, she co-founded an international consulting company Strategic Analysis for Gender Equity (SAGE). Prior to this, she was the Associate Director of the Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) and coordinated the Women's Caucus at five major UN conferences of the 1990s.

Atila Roque is Executive Director of ActionAid USA and has over 15 years experience working in the NGO sector in Brazil. For the last three years, he has been deeply involved with the World Social Forum (WSF) process as a member of the Brazilian Organizing Committee.

Indai Sajor is an activist and educator in the field of women's human rights. She served as Executive Director of the Asian Centre for Women's Human Rights and as Executive Director of the Women's Caucus for Gender Justice at the International Criminal Court.



The Association for Women's Rights in Development is an international membership organization connecting, informing and mobilizing people and organizations committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. A dynamic network of women and men, AWID members are researchers, academics, students, educators, activists, business people, policy-makers, development practitioners, funders and others, half of whom are located in the global South and Eastern Europe.