7.2: Global Civil Society as a Response to Transnational Exclusion

In today's complex world, traditional institutions have struggled to provide effective and legitimate responses to global issues such as climate change, financial instability, disease epidemics, intercultural violence and global inequalities. As a response to these shortcomings, forms of so-called multilevel, stakeholder governance have been established that involve a combination of public and private actors. Civil society action at the international level is predominantly focused on building political frameworks with embedded democratic accountability. At present, most global governance bodies suffer from accountability deficits – that is, they lack the traditional formal mechanisms of democratic accountability that are found in states, such as popularly elected leaders, parliamentary oversight, and non-partisan courts. Instead, the executive councils of global regulatory bodies are mainly composed of bureaucrats who are far removed from the situations that are directly affected by the decisions they take. People in peripheral geographical areas and in marginalised sections of society are especially deprived of recognition, voice and influence in most contexts of global governance as it is currently practised. An apt depiction of such an international system is to describe it as characterised by 'transnational exclusion'.

In recent decades most global regulatory bodies have begun to develop closer relations with civil society organisations precisely in order to fill this legitimacy gap. For example, the Committee on World Food Security within the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation has reserved seats for different types of organisations, including non-governmental organisations and social movements, research centres, financial institutions, private sector associations and private philanthropic foundations. While the role of civil society organisations in these contexts is predominantly based on a consultative status, they allow the civil society organisations to have a seat at the table.

Given their need to balance a deeper impact on society with greater legitimacy, global governance institutions have been under pressure to be more inclusive and attentive to the political demands coming from below. Thanks to such dynamics, civil society actors have managed to increase their access to international agenda-setting, decision-making, monitoring and implementation in relation to global issues. At the same time, the challenge to the inclusion of civil
society actors in global governance mechanisms remains significant. New institutional structures are continually emerging and the challenge in terms of integration is therefore endlessly renewed. New institutional filters are created and civil society actors have to constantly refocus and adapt to new circumstances. An example is provided by the announcement in 2009 that the main economic council of wealthy nations would shift from the G-8 to the G-20 format. The G-20 meets annually and is composed of 19 states plus the European Union. Together its members account for roughly 80 per cent of the world’s trade. In this instance, civil society activists have been lagging behind: activism around the G-8 was intense, but the meetings of the G-20 have only recently attracted a similar level of attention.