9-2011

Commentary: Crisis is danger plus opportunity

Ann FLORINI
Singapore Management University, annflorini@smu.edu.sg

Published in Journal of Civil Society, 2011 September, Volume 7, Issue 3, Pages 273-275
http://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2011.604992

Commentary: Crisis is Danger Plus Opportunity

Ann Florini

To cite this article: Ann Florini (2011) Commentary: Crisis is Danger Plus Opportunity, Journal of Civil Society, 7:3, 273-275, DOI: 10.1080/17448689.2011.604992

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2011.604992

Commentary: Crisis is Danger Plus Opportunity

ANN FLORINI

Brookings Institution, Washington, DC and Singapore Management University School of Social Sciences

John Clark has given us a great deal to be depressed about, in the story he tells about the roles of civil society in addressing the compelling threats of climate change and ecosystem collapse. Fortunately, that account is incomplete. There is another half to the story, one that provides a more hopeful picture. Indeed, a closer look at what is happening in the civil society/environmental arena tells us much about humanity's prospects for dealing with climate change. It tells us even more about the rapidly evolving nature of civil society and humanity's capacity for creative collective action. And from both perspectives, the glass, rather than being empty—or full—could hardly be more evenly divided.

We can divide the roles for civil society organizations in dealing with climate change into the several stages of collective action. Clark focuses primarily on the stage that is civil society's traditional strength—setting the agenda for governments. And here, without doubt he is right to point to what those of us who are convinced by the scientific consensus on the reality of climate change can only view as a disappointing outcome. In what is essentially a battle between vested interests in certain parts of the business community and environmental civil society organizations (CSOs), in the United States the vested interests have proved more powerful. That is not entirely a surprise, as the environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are literally challenging the basic infrastructure of advanced industrial civilization, so there are rather a lot of vested interests involved. (And even in Europe, especially in the UK, CSOs have been relatively more effective in shaping the agenda to which governments must respond.)

But where Clark sees a fragmenting and ineffective civil society coalition, I see a thousand flowers blooming. It is not accurate to infer that all is lost or that CSOs are not doing crucially important good. Let us look at what civil society groups ARE accomplishing with regard to climate change and environmental sustainability more broadly. This requires looking beyond the traditional sort of NGO lobbying. There are a host of innovative governance mechanisms being devised, and an extraordinary range of networks and coalitions that are striving to act directly in the regulatory, monitoring, and enforcement realms of collective action, as well as to find new ways to engage in agenda-setting.

The list of innovative mechanisms is long and getting longer daily. There are at least three types. The first type is a variety of codes of conduct aimed at the business sector that have been developed by all sorts of CSOs. One prominent example of these CSOs is CERES (originally an acronym for the Coalition of Environmentally Responsible Economies), founded by a financial asset manager working in partnership with environmental groups. CERES developed one of the first codes of environmental conduct for business (the CERES Principles, first published in 1989). Since then, we have seen a host of codes of environmental conduct, often developed in business–NGO coalitions. Increasingly, these codes have certification processes attached to give them real teeth, as in the case of the Forest Stewardship Council.

Second, there are a whole series of information disclosure initiatives that are intended to shape corporate behaviour even in the absence of direct governmental regulation or price signals. These initiatives aim to inform investors and/or consumers about the environmental performance of particular companies, thus shaping investment flows and consumption patterns, and giving the companies new incentives to improve their environmental performance. Information disclosure initiatives are particularly prominent in the climate arena, and they have grown directly out of civil society's frustration with the lack of inter-governmental consensus on how to deal with the problem.

These include, for example, the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP), a platform for participating corporations to 'voluntarily' report on their greenhouse gas emissions. It is rather a pro-active platform—CDP's requests for carbon-emission information from thousands of organizations around the world are issued, according to its website, 'on behalf of 551 institutional investors, holding US$71 trillion in assets under management and some 60 purchasing organizations such as Dell, PepsiCo and Wal-Mart.' An alternative way in which CSOs try to get corporations to internalize climate change externalities is to shame them into it by publicizing independent estimates of carbon emissions from facilities. One example is the Carbon Monitoring for Action (CARMA) public database ranking power plants around the world according to their emissions levels.

Third, civil society is looking at the progressive business community for partners to help with lobbying both governments and other businesses, and this approach is starting to lead to results. Where you see the business community engaging progressively with governments, you'll usually find NGOs behind the scenes getting the business leaders on board and organized. A whole series of corporate leader's groups on climate change have been established under various names in a host of countries, from Chile to the US to the UK to Korea, with NGOs and often university-based groups working with business to develop platforms for business to both act on its own externalities and to press governments for serious action. (See, for example, the website of the UK group at http://www.cpsl.cam.ac.uk/Leaders-Groups/The-Prince-of-Wales-Corporate-Leaders-Group-on-Climate-Change.aspx.).

This CSO engagement with business will be increasingly important, indeed absolutely key, as global climate negotiations increasingly shift away from the Kyoto Protocol-type governmental horse-trading to an iterated process of national pledges-and-review. The 16th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Cancun in 2010 recognized the importance of a growing role for the private sector even in the UN process, beyond that already played by the BINGOs (business and industry

NGOs). The meeting saw more discussion of public–private partnerships and mention of the private sector began appearing in the negotiation text. There is now a clear recognition of the compelling need for the private sector's direct involvement in climate finance, technology transfer, and technology innovation. All this adds up to a very important change in how business is seen, one that creates new opportunities for the CSOs that have already made influencing business a key arena of their climate work.

Importantly, it is not only long-established Western environmental NGOs that are proving important in finding ways to address the 'peak crisis' of the world's unsustainable environmental path. In looking beyond the West to 'the rest,' we need to get beyond seeing only victims (of the loss of funds and assistance from the wealthier world) or villains (the authoritarian restrictions by governments long looking for excuses to crack down on the civil society independence they have always disliked). Take, for example, the most important of 'the rest': China. Certainly Chinese civil society organizations must deal with the repressive reflexes of an authoritarian state, but—on environmental issues—they benefit from a governing apparatus that is desperate for help from all sources in dealing with the truly catastrophic environmental conditions imposed by China's breakneck economic growth. China's environmental NGOs are rapidly becoming significant players both within that hugely important country and as links in the transnational networks.

Let me end by suggesting a silver lining to the clouds Clark presents concerning civil society's role in addressing climate change. The codes and metrics and lobbying innovations emerge directly from the failures of the inter-governmental process. Indeed, the obvious lack of inter-governmental consensus may in fact be a good thing, since it is more than possible that such an agreement would be honoured more in the breach than in the promise. Because diplomats are achieving so little, everyone else is being forced to work much harder to figure out how to change behaviour on the ground, which is where the problem needs to be addressed anyhow.

Yes, these innovative mechanisms, the codes and metrics and other measures, remain primitive substitutes for a fully effective regulatory system that could deal with the full range of environmental externalities, including greenhouse gas emissions, that now threaten the planet. Disclosure mechanisms remain too unwieldy to attract widespread and enthusiastic business participation, and too complex to give investors and consumers the kind of immediately helpful information that a price signal would send. But we are in early days yet. Given the absence of anything approaching a government-based coercive global regulatory system of the type that could solve the environment crisis, civil society is proving remarkably imaginative and adept at filling in some of the gaps.

And yes, a binding and fully implemented international agreement that set a price on carbon would make it possible to use those ever-efficient price mechanisms to shape the behaviour of businesses and consumers. But especially on the implementation side, that was never a likely prospect. The inter-governmental processes on climate, and indeed on environmental issues more broadly, will likely end up codifying and taking further the 'regulatory' approaches being developed via non-state actors.