

#3 GLOBAL COALITIONS

by Richard Moyes



Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society organisations have become important actors in national and international politics. In many cases, where change is being sought to particular elements of policy or law, groups of NGOs have come together in coalitions in an effort to achieve that change.

IN THE FIELD OF DISARMAMENT and arms control such coalitions have achieved remarkable successes. The ground-breaking *International Campaign to Ban Landmines* was fundamental to the achievement of the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, the *Cluster Munition Coalition* saw the agreement of the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions and most recently, *Control Arms* provided the momentum for the adoption of the international Arms Trade Treaty. Elsewhere, civil society coalitions have been fundamental to such achievements as the International Criminal Court, the rejection of child soldiers and many other policy and legal developments.

As ICAN grows in strength as a coalition, this chapter highlights some of the key features of civil society coalitions and some of the lessons that have been learned from past experience. Whilst all issues and coalitions present unique features they also share many common challenges. So whilst we should be wary of thinking past approaches can simply be replicated we should also recognise that our experience of working together in the past can make us yet stronger as we work together now and in the future.

Common characteristics of global civil society coalitions



A MEMBERSHIP

The basic characteristic of all global civil society coalitions is the membership:

- » A coalition's membership might include a handful of organisations or several hundred.
- » Members might sign up to a charter with specific duties and responsibilities, or the affiliation might simply require endorsement of a common call.
- » Members are usually organisations rather than individuals, but there are often ways to include individuals in the coalition in one way or another.



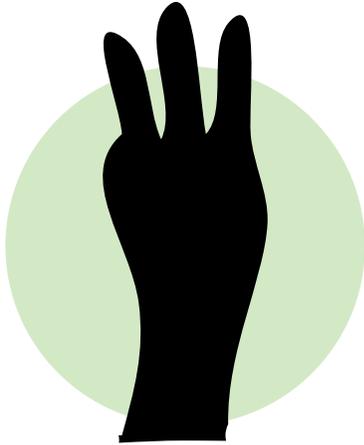
A COMMON CALL FOR CHANGE

Global civil society coalitions come together in order to change practice, policy and sometimes laws at the global level:

- » This purpose is usually expressed as a call or mission statement and endorsing it is often the core requirement for becoming a coalition member.
- » This joint call is often the subject of negotiation among the members; it can be detailed or very broad but in any case it sets the parameters of the coalition's work

Global civil society coalitions tend to have the following characteristics:





A LEADERSHIP

Many coalitions have in place a leadership to guide the policy and planning of the coalition and help facilitate the activities of the membership:

- » The roles and responsibilities of the leadership vary greatly among coalitions.
- » Leadership groups are either elected or appointed. Staff members are often employed to work on behalf of the coalition and coordinating the work of its members. Sometimes staff will be part of the leadership group and sometimes they may be more like a secretariat (yet either way they are likely to have a strong influence on the direction of the coalition).



A PLAN OF ACTION

There is often a general plan of action to achieve the global change that the coalition seeks:

- » Depending on the level of coherence within the coalition, this plan might be more or less detailed at the global level.
- » It could be a set of objectives on which governments to lobby through a campaign or global meetings, or it could be a more detailed analysis of the power dynamics and political targets among decision makers at the international level.
- » Members will often determine the best way to effect change in their own national or regional context.



A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Coalitions often promote a collective identity for themselves

- » This can include a name, slogan, logo and visual identity.
- » Individual member organisations may communicate on behalf of the coalition, or identify themselves as members when undertaking specific actions, such as talking to governments or the media.

Why do NGOs work in global coalitions?

CIVIL SOCIETY COALITIONS EMERGE for a variety of reasons. Some motivating factors include:

- » The desire to maximise NGO influence on advocacy targets in different countries, including helping activists overcome obstacles at a national level by drawing on international support.
- » The need to make the most of scarce human and financial resources and to avoid duplication of effort among NGOs working on similar issues.
- » The desire to ensure effective communications among key NGO actors working on a particular issue and to pool the expertise available to NGOs.
- » The desire to speak with one voice to avoid NGO disunity on an issue. Opponents will be all too willing to exploit differences in opinion among NGOs in order to undermine the overall goal being pursued.

Working in coalitions also provides a coordinated way for NGOs to forge and maintain strategic partnerships with external actors. It is easier for a government to relate to a coalition as a single partner that represents the range of civil society actors on an issue than to work out whom to interact with from among a host of organisations.

However, coalitions also impose costs and constraints on member organisations. A key trade-off when working in coalition is between the gains in effectiveness (stronger voice and wider reach) on the one hand and the amount of time and resources spent in making a coalition work on the other.

Coalitions have been described as a ‘necessary bureaucracy’ and every coalition an NGO joins brings with it another set of communications, another email list and another set of conference calls and meetings.



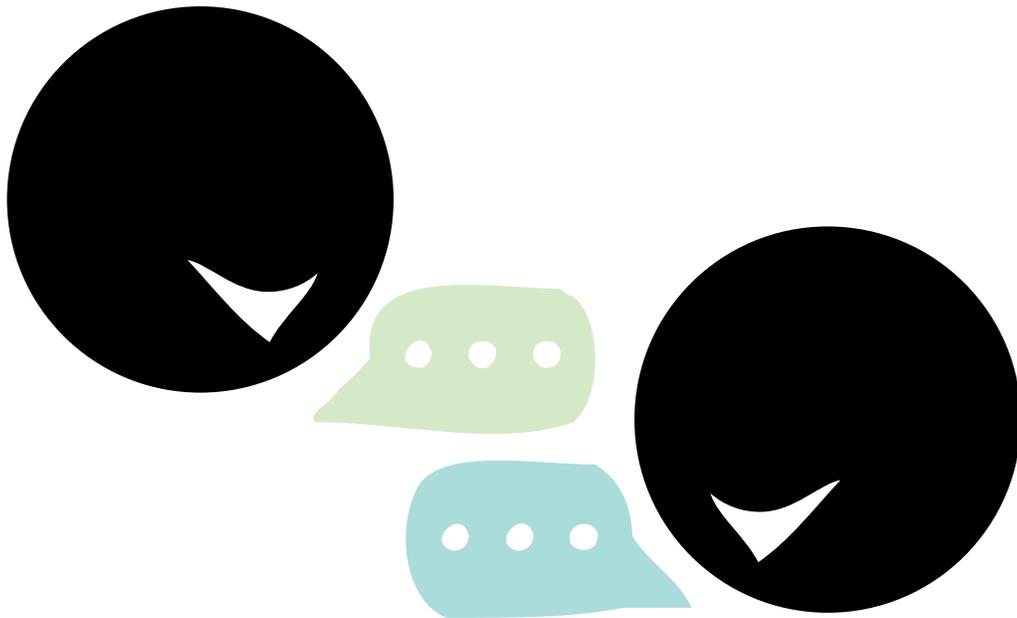
Two key themes: Trust and communication

AS COALITIONS COME TOGETHER and develop it is the trust between individuals and organisations involved and the flow of communication that will turn a group of organisations into a powerful policy-changing force. Trust itself can develop from effective communication, in particular from effective communication in the face of disagreement and tension. Tensions and disagreements are inevitable between groups of people and institutions.

The particular challenge for civil-society coalitions is that there are no fixed rules or practices regarding how these dynamics are to be addressed

or resolved. Such tensions can be very valuable, demanding scrutiny of policy positions, strategies and ways of working, but they can also create major problems if not addressed effectively.

Many of the issues that civil-society coalitions have worked on are very gloomy in their subject matter, often being focused on issues of deprivation or suffering internationally. Despite this, working in coalitions can be, and arguably should be, very enjoyable and very rewarding. Communication, trust and many other elements of collective work are greatly enhanced where people are enjoying what they do.



TEN LESSONS LEARNED

#1 BELIEVE CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

Even when critics and mainstream observers say the task is impossible, including your allies, it's crucial to have leadership that truly believes the goal is achievable and necessary.

#2 BE READY

When progress is difficult use the time to build the strength and reach of the network and to strengthen the coalition's evidence and arguments. Growing the coalition, supporting members in the production of research and analysis, and informal meetings with strategic partners can all build foundations for the future. This helps to build a community of practice ready to full advantage of opportunities when they arise.

#3 MOVE FAST AND MAKE IT INEVITABLE

Once the opportunity arises, move fast and keep up the momentum. Having an external deadline can help keep up the pace. This helps maintain a sense of humanitarian urgency. With momentum on your side you can foster a sense of the inevitability of the outcome.

#4 DOMINATE THE DATA

Building recognition that the coalition and its members are a reliable source for authoritative information on the issue at hand is vital to working with the public, the media, governments and international organisations. There is usually no need to overstate the case or inflate the problem in order to explain the need for change.

#5 SET THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE

It is not always necessary to win an argument you are presented with; it can be better to reframe the problem in a way that gives you the upper hand. Legal and technical arguments can be important, but they can also be ways by which the unacceptability of the status quo gets obscured or lost sight of. The burden of proof needs to be pushed onto those that claim reform is not needed or should only be limited and piecemeal.

#6 CONSTANT FOCUS ON THE HUMAN IMPACT

An key part of reframing the debate is to move beyond the common legal framing of balancing humanitarian and military considerations and to focus on the human suffering as unacceptable. This in turn sets the bench-mark for whether any proposed reform is sufficient or not.

#7 LEADERSHIP FROM THOSE DIRECTLY AFFECTED

Survivors and those directly affected should be leading voices in the campaign. They need to be supported effectively to ensure their inclusion and empowerment.

#8 A POWERFUL COALITION

Build a powerful coalition by being coordinated, diverse, inclusive, cooperative and ‘affiliative’ - understanding the different perspectives the coalition’s members bring.

#9 FOSTER STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

To change international law, a coalition will need to work in partnership with governments and international organisations. Where the coalition is made up of NGOs other key partners are likely to include parliamentarians, faith leaders, academics, journalists, amongst others. Individuals, personalities and relationships are sometimes more important than the policies and institutional mandates.

#10 DO A LOT WITH A LITTLE

It is vital to use resources strategically in ways that will actually contribute to change. One good contact with a strong relationship in a key country can be more important than a big public campaign in that country - the value comes from all of these contacts working together. It is often strong strategy more than anything else that enables the resources available to result in change.