

Amnesty International-Strengthening Democracy
First Consultation Paper

AI Members Only

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Amnesty International
International Secretariat
Peter Benenson House
1 Easton Street
London WC1X 0DW
United Kingdom

To *All sections and structures, members, partners, community-based organizations*
From *The International Committee for Strengthening Democracy*
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**Strengthening Amnesty International's Democracy
Consultation Pack 1
Part 3 – Governance in other organizations**

Summary

This first consultation pack comprises the following documents:

Part 1: The ICSD's first consultation paper, "Effective Democratic Governance" setting out its proposed overall approach to strengthening AI's democracy as well as a summary of the key areas the ICSD believes need specific attention

Part 2: Summary I: Results of Earlier Assessments

Part 3: Summary II: Governance in other organizations

Distribution

This consultation pack is issued to all sections, structures and interested members as well as to selected partners and community-based organizations. The consultation paper "Effective Democratic Governance" will also be made accessible on the internet.

Recommended Actions

Please ensure that this consultation pack is brought to the attention of the chair, board and director of your section/structure, and to those members, partners and other organizations interested in and/or most directly affected by AI's decisions and decision-making processes.

Strengthening Amnesty International's Democracy

Part 3: Background Notes - Summary 2

Governance in other organizations compared to AI

Executive Summary

The committee has looked at how other civil society organizations¹ structure their governance and at the best practice documents two of them (Save the Children and Greenpeace) have developed. Comparing Amnesty's governance with the status quo and the ambitions of other leading civil society organizations shows that the governance structures of Amnesty International are more geared towards the principles of grassroots democracy than the structures of any of the other organizations. At the same time provisions to secure the quality of the output of Amnesty International's governance structures are comparatively underdeveloped:

Amnesty International's mass membership-based global governance is less effective than other organizations' approaches

➤ *AI is the only organization whose global governance is based on mass membership*

While some national chapters of international organizations base their governance on mass membership Amnesty International is the only organization of those reviewed whose global governance is, at least partly, based on a mass membership system. Global organizations either have a small number of carefully selected members or the national chapters of the organization hold the global membership positions or there is a mix of individual and organizational memberships. In most cases fewer than 100 members are involved in the organization's global governance. In AI's case over two million individuals have theoretically the right to be involved in the organization's global governance and at least several hundred are actively involved.

➤ *Amnesty International does not fully enjoy the benefits of grassroots democracy but it suffers from its disadvantages*

The main advantage of a governance system based on mass membership is democratic legitimacy. This advantage is not fully working to Amnesty's benefit as only a small

¹ Amnesty International - Care International - Child Fund International (former CCF) - Greenpeace International - Oxfam International - Plan International - International Save the Children Alliance - International Federation Terre des Hommes - Transparency International - World Vision International

percentage of members de facto participate in AI's global democracy. The most important disadvantages are that the system is very costly and rather slow. Compared to organizations with a more selective membership AI's system struggles to secure a comparable degree of accountability and control.

Amnesty International's assembly (ICM) does not sufficiently provide the supervision and control which is usually expected from the highest governing body

- *Amnesty International has by far the largest assembly, its ICM, meeting less frequently than most other Assemblies*

Bringing together several hundred representatives every second year is a very costly and demanding exercise. These are good reasons explaining why the ICM only meets every second year – and why a proposal was presented to have the meetings only every third year.

- *Fewer meetings means less leadership and control*

The downside to having such long intervals between the meetings of the highest governing body is that it can neither fully play its role as AI's highest decision-making body nor its role in supervising the Board (the IEC). Most other organizations have (much smaller) annual assemblies, usually in time to receive and approve the organizations' audited annual accounts. AI seems to have attempted to address this issue in part by instituting an annual Chairs Forum.

Amnesty International's Board (IEC) is not ideally positioned to provide high-quality leadership

- *Amnesty International's Board is hampered by a significant lack of continuity*

In comparison with other Boards the IEC is one of the smallest Boards and its two-year terms are among the shortest in the sector. Together with an election system which does not guarantee continuity either the global Board is affected by frequent change. Leading a global organization as extended and complex as Amnesty International requires leaders to learn for a year or two before they become fully valuable for the organization.

- *The formal threshold to becoming an AI Board member is lower than in most other organizations*

Being a member of Amnesty International, nominated by a section or structure, is the only formal requirement for standing for elections to the global Board. Specific knowledge, experience or skills are not formally required. Also a system is lacking which would make sure that the Board has always the balance of skills (human rights, finance, marketing advocacy, etc.) required of the team leading the organization.

AI's Democratic Structures Compared to Other Civil Society Organizations

The Berlin Civil Society Center has made available to Amnesty International the findings of a governance review conducted with the participation of ten international Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)². The findings presented below refer to the question of democratic decision making.

Comparing AI's International Council Meeting (ICM) to other global assemblies

In comparison with other assemblies the ICM is by far the largest (the second largest having 110 participants and the third largest 52). It meets less frequently than most of the other Assemblies and it is the only one with (some) participants directly appointed by local groups. While specific criteria for selecting ICM delegates vary in sections and structures across the movement, Amnesty is the only CSO we looked at where membership in a national board is not required to become an Assembly delegate – being a member of the movement is sufficient

- Amnesty International is one of eight organizations which have a global assembly (in AI's case called International Council Meeting, ICM). Two organizations have only a global Board.
- Amnesty International's assembly meets only every second year while most others (five) meet annually (one meets twice a year and one every third year).
- AI's assembly is one of two who have more than 100 participants while most others (four) have between 20 and 30 participants (one has below 20 and one between 30 and 50 participants).
- Amnesty International is the only organization which, in some cases, allows local groups to directly appoint delegates to the Assembly. In six organizations delegates are appointed by the Boards of national chapters and in one by the global Board.
- Amnesty International is the only organization in which being a member of the organization (and being selected by a national chapter) is the only formal precondition for participation in the Assembly. Five organizations require membership in a national Board and two have criteria of competency and loyalty.

Looking at the total picture the ICM is more based on grassroots democracy than any of the other assemblies. But as it is extremely large and meets only every second year it is less well-positioned to provide effective leadership (e.g. strategic direction) and secure democratic control (e.g. on annual audits, the work of the IEC, etc.).

Comparing AI's IEC to other global Boards

In comparison with other Boards the IEC is one of the smallest Boards. It meets more frequently than most of the other Boards and its members have the shortest terms of office. Like for the Assembly the formal threshold for entering the global Board is lower than in all other organizations.

- All of the 10 reviewed organizations, including Amnesty International, have a global Board, in AI's case called International Executive Committee (IEC).
- Meeting up to five times a year the IEC is meeting quite frequently (two of the other Boards meet once a year, one meets twice, two meet three times, three meet four times, and one meets six times a year).
- Amnesty International's Board is one of the smallest (one of three which have less than 10 members while four have between 10 and 20 members, two between 20 and 30 and one has over 30 members).

² Pls. see footnote 1

- The terms of office of Amnesty International’s Board members are among the shortest. Like one other organization AI has two years terms (five have three years terms, one has four years terms, one has terms of six years and one doesn’t have terms of office).
- With a maximum of six years the time an IEC member can stay on the Board is also among the shortest (three have max. six years, two have max. eight years, one has max. nine years and one has no terms).
- Amnesty International is one of four organizations where the Assembly elects the Board while in five others the national chapters appoint the Board members (sometimes endorsed by the global Assembly). In one case governance regions appoint the Board.
- Amnesty International is the only organization in which members of the global Board only need to be members of the organization. Seven organizations require membership of a national Board as a pre-condition for joining the global Board. One consists exclusively of national CEOs and one explicitly bans members of national chapters from being on the global Board.

Selected Current thinking on decision-making:

The Link Between Democracy and Activism

Whatever rights we enjoy in democratic societies are not god-given. Equality and justice have only ever been won through some form of protest. That’s easy to forget in our ahistorical times. We’ve forgotten both the importance of democratic dissent and the rich tradition of activism . . . But more and more people are unwilling to accept that; they are turning to activism to ensure that their voices are heard. Even if those who cling to traditional politics don’t like it, activism represents nothing so much as an informed, passionate and engaged citizenry.³

Effective Decision-making

Decision-making must be consultative enough for shared ownership of the outcomes, and directive enough to be timely, while ensuring accountability. The reason for opting for a consultative process (internally and externally) is that people more willingly modify their behaviour when they participate in the problem analysis. The task for managers is to treat their role in decision making as one of facilitating a group process with the right group of people and then discharging their final authority in a transparent way. The NGO approach to consultative decision making typically relies upon committees and meetings – often to the detriment of effectiveness. Experience suggests that effective decision making requires:

- Involving those who directly control a situation – “the gatekeepers” – and those most affected;
- Mediation and guiding the process rather than directing it;
- A culture of openness and self-criticism;
- A clear allocation and mutual understanding of who is responsible for what.⁴

³ Falconer, Tim. *Watchdogs and Gadflies: Activism from Marginal to Mainstream*, Canada: Penguin Books (2001).

⁴ Alan Fowler, *Striking A Balance: A Guide to enhancing NGO Effectiveness* (UK: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 1997) p.61.

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