

Global changes and civil society – background paper for ‘Civil society at a new frontier’: INTRAC conference, December 2011¹

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Introduction: challenges and opportunities in a changing world

The world is undergoing a period of major economic and social change. All too often, world leaders have reacted to such change by adopting positions of either indifference or ignorance. The leaders of Greece and Italy have recently lost their jobs over their perceived failure to cope with the financial difficulties affecting their countries. We are likely to see many more profound political changes in the near future. It is not only politicians who have sought to deny the challenges facing the world. Civil society leaders are also often guilty of assuming that life will continue unchanged, and that current operational practices will remain indefinitely relevant. By not adapting or seeking new solutions to new challenges, such attitudes inhibit civil society’s ability to work effectively in a changing environment.

This paper explores the challenges confronting civil society at a time of unprecedented and widely underestimated global change. It contributes to the international debate by setting the scene; by describing some of the key changes; and by looking at ways in which civil society might adapt to them. The paper begins by identifying some of the trends relevant to civil society and delineates the areas which may present a challenge to how civil society and its leadership have operated in recent years. The analytical approach that I use to define ‘civil society’ has evolved from a functional understanding of that term. I moved from a general definition of civil society - as the arena between the state, the market and the individual – to a more specific understanding of what we see as the five key socio-political functions of civil society. This provides a robust and dynamic conceptual definition, as opposed to the descriptive and typological way in which civil society is commonly understood.

We are in a world where many countries formerly classified as ‘poor’, are experiencing rapid economic growth. Some have already graduated to middle-income status and are no longer aid recipients. Meanwhile, the ‘developed’ world is demonstrating low rates of growth and heavy indebtedness. Numerous countries are cutting their public sector budgets, including their aid programmes. The international balance of economic and political power is shifting towards new countries and regions. As one speaker recently remarked at a G20 warm-up meeting: ‘the new axis of the world economy no longer spans the Atlantic, but more probably ranges from Mumbai to Shanghai.’³ Within this wider context, I aim to explore some of the specific challenges to civil society and to enrich the debate about its roles and responsibilities.

¹ Further background papers on: corporate social responsibility, aid after the MDGs, new private donors, and bridging social capital are available at www.intrac.org/resources.php

² Many of these ideas have emerged from the work of INTRAC, discussions with colleagues and partners – this paper provides a summary of current debates.

³ Rajesh Tandon, London, March 2009.

Clearly some of these challenges also represent new opportunities for civil society. Many of them potentially affect its entire role and structure. We are arguably at a critical juncture, a threshold where much is in flux and where contingency is paramount. How civil society organisations respond to the current situation may well decide their long-term fortunes and determine the future context in which they will operate.

Background: shifting contexts

- For the last decade, much of the western world has experienced a pervasive preoccupation with 'heightened security'. The war on terror has seen international hostilities, national conflicts and terrorist attacks on civilians. In trying to combat such security threats, developed countries have experienced restrictions on domestic freedoms. Civil society has come under increased legal and political pressure. Some governments have clearly used the threat of terrorism as a justification for repressing local civil society organisations and quelling legitimate political protest. Counter-terrorism has provided a cloak by which autocrats have attempted to consolidate their power; not only through removing formal political opposition, but also by silencing the independent political voices which can arise from civil society.⁴
- Poverty is no longer the only priority of international development. Major concerns (especially those articulated by donor governments) have expanded to include climate change and security issues. Climate change and environmental threats are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Humanitarian crises and economic disruptions will likely be a perennial problem. Questions over carbon emissions, bio diversity, and the adaptability of traditional livelihoods to new climatic patterns, will become more acute.
- Emerging powers are tending to be more concerned with maintaining high rates of growth than with acknowledging and mitigating the potentially negative impacts that such growth can produce. Access to raw materials seems to be of paramount importance. We are witnessing land grabs by agriculturally poor countries in the Middle East and elsewhere, as they attempt to establish their food security. In China, we have seen efforts to create new sources of raw materials and foodstuffs through mining and mass agriculture.
- Recession has led to many of the stronger economies prioritising their perceived national interests. Traditional bilateral donors are becoming more restrictive and selective in their partnerships. One re-emerging trend is that of aid tied to the private sector. In the Netherlands, for example, new aid opportunities must be linked to national commercial comparative advantages, such as water technology; whilst in Canada the aid programme is focussed on middle-income countries in Latin America.
- The financial meltdown in North America and Europe is already hitting the middle classes. Standards of living have been declining or stagnant for as long as ten or fifteen years. The 'new austerity' is having a profound but somewhat disguised impact on these societies. This extent of this impact has been obscured due to its generational nature: older people are still benefitting from private property gains and

⁴ See McMahon, J. (2007) 'Briefing Paper 11: Developments in the Regulation of NGOs via Government Counter-Terrorism Measures and Policies', Oxford: INTRAC; Sen, K. (2007) 'Briefing Paper 10: The War on Terror and the Onslaught on Development', Oxford: INTRAC; Zharkevich, I. (2010): 'Briefing Paper 26 - The changing face of the 'war on terror': New developments in counter-terrorism legislation and its impact on civil society', Oxford: INTRAC.

favourable pensions, whereas the younger generation are confronted by unemployment, student loans, low salaries and an inaccessible housing market. Austerity is also leading to tighter aid budgets and tougher migration policies. Civil society groups can expect to find their activities increasingly pressured and directed by 'small-state' governments with expectations that civil society and the third sector will make good any gaps in social welfare provision.

- It is important to take account of the emergence of new international configurations. Along with the move from the G7 to the G20, there is increasing pressure for the UN Security Council to open up to new and powerful entrants, such as India and China. There has been a long-term decline in the influence and prestige of many of the international institutions. As emerging powers join the UN, it is uncertain whether this influx will breathe new life into the organisation, or merely make it harder for it to enact meaningful resolutions. It is not clear if new powers with a recent history of progressive domestic legislation (Brazil and South Africa, for example) will maintain this ethos in their international relations. History would suggest that we should not be surprised if such countries prioritise their own interests over those of any 'global benefit'.
- We should not underestimate the importance of citizens across the world taking to the streets and demanding new freedoms – from the Arab Spring to the Côte d'Ivoire, to Libya and Nepal. In India we have seen mass movements protesting against corruption. In the UK, there have been large-scale online campaigns against proposed government changes to institutions such as the National Health Service. Avaaz, a global web-based movement, has mobilised many hundreds of thousands of people through its online petitions and coordinated actions.⁵

Development trends

Within this shifting context some specific development trends have emerged.

- Civil society organisations are being co-opted into becoming not-for-profit commercial sub-contractors to the state. For many it is now considered normal to conflate NGOs and civil society, and in doing so consider them merely as sub-contractors delivering social welfare services. We have to ask – how did we move from being charitable or private development organisations to part of the state service delivery system through the privatisation of social welfare? This model is now being introduced through international NGOs and aid agencies (the Paris Declaration⁶, for example, implicitly assumes that local civil society will in the future be supported by tax based funds from local government contracting out services to local NGOs.)
- There has been a narrowing of foci.
 - **Short-term results.** Aid procedures now focus on impact by prioritising the measurement of short-term quantifiable results of intervention. The immediate product of international assistance (outputs and outcomes) have wrongly been relabelled 'impact', whilst the real long-term impacts of social, economic and political interventions are for the most part ignored.

⁵ See www.avaaz.org for more details. The organisation claims to have over 10 million supporters worldwide.

⁶ See OECD (2008) 'The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action', Paris, France: OECD. www.oecd.org/dataoecd/11/41/34428351.pdf

- **Narrow aims.** We have retreated from concepts of social or human development and now hide behind the immediate outcomes of very specific programmes. Thus general health has given way to immunisation, education to basic literacy, economic development to microcredit. In and of themselves these are all worthy activities, but ones which fall far short of the longer term goals of sustainable and equitable human development which previously drove many assistance efforts. This narrowing is often accompanied by an acceptance that social safety nets, provided through civil society organisations, are the best that we can hope to offer.
- **Pressure on budgets** is already leading to changes in international aid and is likely to lead to rethinking of future programmes as present planning periods come to an end.
- **A lack of strategic focus and long-term goals** is evident in official and NGO aid agencies. (Long term 'development' is assumed especially by official donors to be covered elsewhere in private sector led finance and growth).
- Tough economic times have seen governments and politicians move towards right-wing policies. There has been some undermining of aid generally, and of civil society support specifically (notably in the Netherlands, Sweden, UK and Canada). Other NGOs seem to have lost their ability to set their own agendas instead of blindly following national or international orthodoxies. Organisations scramble for new money from the global funds whilst ignoring long-held beliefs. The self-criticism I heard recently from a UN official, off the record, could easily apply to many NGOs: 'we have transformed from an organisation designed to serve, to one which is mainly concerned with self-preservation'.
- There has been a retreat from aid to middle-income countries and a general reduction in donor-served development programmes (The Dutch government has reduced to only 15 priority countries for its external assistance, the UK from 100 to 30)⁷. We are left with aid accruing to a small number of countries: those in acute poverty (mainly sub-Saharan Africa), security threats (accounting for the UK government's involvement in Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan) or those that line up with national interests (as countries maintain contacts with their ex-colonies, such as the Dutch in Indonesia or the French in western Africa).
- INGOs are following their governments in deciding to focus on poor countries rather than poor people. This approach constitutes a historical change as previously the usual approach was to work with pockets of poverty rather than adopting a national-based decision making process. For example, Plan International traditionally had no country offices and Oxfam initially worked in north-eastern Brazil and did not plan work across the whole country. Other NGOs often focussed on specific groups according to their own mandates, and would work with (for example) disabled people, women and indigenous groups regardless of where they lived.

⁷ See Giffen, J., with B. Pratt (2011) 'After the MDGs – what then?', Briefing Paper 28, Oxford: INTRAC.

Rethinking civil society

In light of these challenges, I feel that it is time to identify alternative approaches to understanding the role of civil society. This will enable us to:

- move beyond the existing situation in which so much of civil society is co-opted through NGOs into the aid industry, with a consequent loss of independence. There is a tendency for too many NGOs to focus on donor concerns rather than building up a membership or constituency base.
- recognise the frustration of citizens who feel unrepresented by professional intermediary organisations, and the failure by civil society in many countries to engage with citizens.⁸
- acknowledge a breakdown of old polarities – how useful is it to analyse civil society through ‘north/south’ or ‘rich/poor’ paradigms?⁹
- recognise that co-optation, abuse and misuse of concepts and words to serve an aid business clashes with the original missions of many civil society organisations. Key ideas such as participation, democracy, and civic action have been neutered and re-employed to serve ends other than those for which they were initially intended.

In late 2008 we gathered together over 40 case studies, and 100 thinkers and activists to examine civil society.¹⁰

We came up with a **framework** for action and analysis. It was felt that this framework was necessary because the dominance and resource level of NGOs engaged in the aid industry had created an imbalance in thinking about civil society. We had reached a situation where, for many people, NGOs had become synonymous with ‘civil society’. In fact, the concept and practice of civil society can be something far bigger; including both registered civil society organisations as well as unregistered informal groups. These informal associations are prevalent in all of our lives.

Our identities as individuals are not defined by just one aspect of our lives - by our gender, our employment in the state or private sector, our membership of a club, or our religion - we all have multiple identities. It is these multiple interests and identities which can lend civil society its rich plurality.

We felt that it was important to go back to first principles and explore these identities as key foundational functions of civil society and to see how they can play out in practice. Hence our framework was based on the many case studies which were brought to the conference. It was a conscious decision that this framework did not start with the principle of service delivery; we need to move away from this aid-dominated paradigm. That civil society organisations provide services to their members is an off-shoot of their activities rather than a defining characteristic.

We stressed the plurality of civil society for two reasons. First, to distinguish civil society from ‘uncivil’ society, defined as comprising those groups who found their identity on an inherent

⁸ CIVICUS (2011) ‘Bridging the gaps: Citizens, organisations and dissociation. Civil Society Index summary report 2008-2011’, Johannesburg, South Africa: CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ ‘Whatever Happened to Civil Society?’, INTRAC international conference, 2008. See www.intrac.org/pages/en/past-events.html

intolerance. Fundamentalist groups, extremist political factions and repressive governments that attempt to restrict dissenting views or debates are anathema to the ethos of genuine civil society. Second, we regard the plurality of civil society as not only its primary characteristic, but as its key strength. It is the fact that individuals have multiple, overlapping identities, that they interact, negotiate and form associations with each other, which engenders social trust and helps create a healthy society.

Five key functions of civil society¹¹

- 1) **Generating the social basis for democracy.** By extending the culture of democracy from the grassroots upwards, people become accustomed to processes of negotiation and representation. This takes democracy beyond the basic (but important) procedural level of free and fair elections. It creates norms, systems and networks which ensure that democracy at a national level is founded on interactive experiences at the local level. Hence it is difficult to envisage a truly democratic state without a correspondingly strong and pluralistic civil society.
- 2) **Promoting political accountability.** Civil society helps to counterbalance elites and other market or politically based interests. Citizens have the right to be heard, and to expect certain things from the state; to ensure that this happens civil society comes together in a variety of formal or informal associations. This myriad of civil society organisations reminds political leaders that they are there to serve the citizen and not vice-versa. Civil society organisations may often be involved in 'politics with a small p' - not only with large national or international issues. A strong civil society will act as a check, ensuring that elites do not monopolise or abuse power through state, market or civic mechanisms
- 3) **Producing trust, reciprocity and networks.** The coming together of people in multiple types of interaction is important not only for organising but also for building relations between people. Trust must be well-founded and reciprocal; otherwise societies become fragmented, unable to work together and liable to minority dominance. In Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kenya and a host of other countries we have seen that what Frances Stewart calls 'horizontal inequalities',¹² can lead to conflict between people on the same socioeconomic level (rather than traditional concepts of conflict in class or other hierarchical terms). From the smallest parent-run play group, to a major trade union, relationships are built in a way which creates the social fabric (some say 'social capital') that enables societies to actually work. A plural, interlocking and cross-cutting set of relationships are both characteristics and functions of civil society. This is one of the areas where the private sector and civil society share common ground, as they both require social trust for their businesses and activities to thrive.
- 4) **Creating and promoting alternatives.** Civil society is a source of innovation, contesting ideas, concepts and empirical experiences. The vested interests of

¹¹ Based on Beauclerk, J., B. Pratt and R. Judge (2011) *Civil Society in Action: Global case studies in a practice based framework*, Oxford: INTRAC

¹² Stewart, F. (2009) 'CRISE Working Paper no. 1, Horizontal Inequalities: A Neglected Dimension of Development', Oxford: CRISE. www.crise.ox.ac.uk/pubs/workingpaper1.pdf

politicians and civil servants tend to constrain new thinking and ideas in these areas. - we see that in international development and related fields there are very few major ideas that ever came from the state. From microcredit, to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, new ideas and competing ideas have originated from and were discussed and debated in the forum of civil society. One of the keys in making civil society pluralistic and 'civil' is an emphasis on negotiation and discussion, rather than the imposition of ideology and curtailment of dissent.

- 5) **Supporting the rights of citizens and the concept of citizenship.** The state has to earn its legitimacy from its citizens. The idea that citizens have equal rights before the law is an essential component of the rule of law; that the state recognises this is essential. It is unrealistic to assume each citizen has the time, resources or influence to deal with the state on their own, hence civil society organisations become an important conduit for representing citizens and their interests. Regardless of whether it is through a play group, allotment association, chamber of commerce, Amnesty International, indigenous social movement or neighbourhood watch scheme – such groups are legitimate expressions of citizens' interests and concerns. Unfortunately the state often regards itself as being in competition with civil society, rather than civil society being its 'master' or a force to be cooperated with for mutual benefit.

Looking forward: new challenges and potential responses

In addition to the manifold problems currently which currently beset civil society, there are likely to be new **local and global** challenges in the future, including:

- Issues such as climate change. There will be implications for individual nations directly affected as well as for the international community. Debates will centre on global public goods, adaptation, threats of increasing food prices, movements of populations etc.
- Domestic poverty. Developed countries have often failed to deal with structural poverty; increasing inequality is exacerbating this challenge. Many developing and emerging economies are showing all the same issues of increasing inequality, a booming middle class, and large swathes of the population barely touched by growth.
- Attempts to have growth without democracy (e.g. the Chinese model) leading to repression, corruption and elite control.

In order to meet these challenges, civil society needs to first recognise that it has intrinsic value, and is not merely a force which can engage with the state. This is what lays behind our focus on the underlying functions of civil society, which ultimately provide crucial support to the functioning of any state. This paper has argued that:

- The current, large, often interdependent, global changes will lead to major challenges to civil society.
- We need to regain the concept of civil society from the aid industry (both official and non-governmental).
- We need to re-value civil society and its essential functions if governments and others are not to destroy it – either through repression or through funding dependence and co-optation.

Regardless of what aided civil society actors do, local civil society organisations will continue to be formed and to act on behalf of their members in many different ways. Even under repressive regimes, we have seen that such civil society organisations will emerge and function. It is crucial for professional intermediate civil society organisations (including NGOs) to respond to changes in such a way as they support and not weaken civil society. There will be new challenges for civil society organisations and leaders in the very near future, as well as for those of us who promote the essential roles of civil society.

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