

## Civil Society and Governance: an introduction

*Written by Terence Wood: Dev-Zone Programme, The Development Resource Centre.*

**Disclaimer:** The following document does not reflect the beliefs of the symposium organisers or the organisations they work for. It is intended only as an outline of some of the arguments that are commonly made in discussions on civil society and governance.

The idea that civil society has a key role to play in improving governance in developing countries has risen to prominence in recent years. The influential United Nations Millennium Project Report, *Investing In Development*, for example, claims that, “strong civil society engagement and participation are crucial to effective governance”.<sup>i</sup> While a major AusAID report on good governance states that, “good governance requires a strong and pluralistic civil society, where there is freedom of expression and association.”<sup>ii</sup>

Such claims have a sound basis in political science,<sup>iii</sup> and it is easy to find examples of civil society improving governance. But, at the same time, as is so often the case in development, the reality on the ground is complex and key questions remain unresolved. Strong civil society is certainly a force for better governance in some instances, but is this always the case? And what about government’s impact on civil society? Is it realistic to expect civil society to function effectively when governance is poor and governments repressive? There are also numerous practical questions associated with how we, as development actors, interact with civil society in developing countries. How can we best strengthen civil society? Can we, in fact, act to strengthen civil society at all? Or is a vibrant civil society something that has to develop from within?

These are just some of the issues we hope to examine at the *DevNet-NZAID Symposium on Civil Society and Governance*. To help this happen, this document has been designed to give you some brief background on the subject of civil society and civil society’s relationship with improved governance. The background starts by discussing definitions of civil society. It then outlines some of the main arguments made as to why civil society ought to be expected to improve governance. This is then followed by some ‘counter arguments’ or explanations of why the relationship between civil society and good governance can be more complicated than one might initially expect.

This background isn’t intended to be the final word on the issue of civil society and governance – rather it is intended to be a potential starting point for your thinking around the issue.

One point that is worth noting upfront is that – reflecting the dominance that has been afforded to western political thought in development discourse on civil society and governance – this background limits itself to western conceptualisations of civil

society and governance. There are, however, alternative formulations of these ideas stemming from other cultural and philosophical positions. In the lead up to the symposium you may well wish to consider whether the western model is the most appropriate for the work you do.

### *Civil Society Defined*

On their website, the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics (LSE) provides what might be described as a ‘textbook’ definition of civil society:

Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.<sup>iv</sup>

In this definition civil society is an ‘arena’, or socio-political space, populated by organisations (either formal or informal).

There are four key elements of the LSE definition that ought to be emphasised:

1. Collective action: civil society involves people acting collectively as opposed to on their own.
2. The absence of coercion: individuals ought to be able to join or leave civil society organisations of their own free will.
3. Distinct: civil society is – theoretically, at least – distinct from government, family, and the market (private firms and enterprises).
4. Blurred boundaries: while it is easy to think of organisations that undoubtedly fall within the space defined above, there are numerous others where the case may not be quite so clear cut. Some church groups, for example, may exert considerable pressure on their members not to leave. Some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) may receive almost all of their funding from the government and may be contracted to perform tasks that, in other countries, are normally associated with the state. This doesn't mean that these churches or NGOs are not part of civil society just that, as the definition says, the boundaries between civil society, markets and the state are inevitably blurred.

Stemming from such standard definitions of civil society is a related term commonly used in discussions of development: Civil Society Organisation (CSO). This term is

used to refer to organisations that meet the criteria outlined above and which are to be found within the ‘arena’ of civil society.

The London School of Economics’ definition of civil society is not the only one, of course. Nor is it uncontested. Some authors include in their definition of civil society social processes such as traditional systems of reciprocity<sup>v</sup> while others argue for the inclusion of the private sector.<sup>vi</sup> Some authors go further still, arguing for dramatically different definitions.

Michael Edwards, one of the keynote speakers at this event, while not contesting standard definitions like the LSE one above, argues that on their own they are insufficient for a proper understanding of the interaction between collective action and healthy politics. In his book ‘Civil Society’ Edwards argues that the definitions like that provided by the LSE ought to be augmented by two additional complimentary meanings of the term. These are:

1. Civil society as the good society: A definition where the term civil society becomes description of the sort of societies we hope to obtain – societies which are *civil*. That is, societies that provide for the security and material needs of their citizens while offering them space for active social and political participation.
2. Civil society as the public sphere: In this definition civil society is synonymous with the public sphere – the home of all our collective interaction. Interacting within the public sphere we find, not only CSOs, but also individuals, business, the government and other organisations. The public sphere is the venue for our day-to-day political interactions – for voting, for discussion, for debates, for demonstrations. A healthy public sphere will be characterised by strong information flows, opportunities for participation for all citizens, and deliberation – as opposed to conflict and polarisation.<sup>vii</sup>

For Edwards the three definitions complement each other: CSOs are necessary for well-governed societies, but at the same time, we need to ‘keep our eyes on the prize’ – we don’t aim to strengthen CSOs because that is a good thing of its own accord, but rather because of what it can do for us in creating a civil society. Similarly, CSOs contribute to a healthy public sphere, but they are not the only necessary ingredient. And when the public sphere is dysfunctional CSOs may struggle to operate, or may become actively destructive.

For the purposes of expediency, over the rest of this document I am going to work from the ‘textbook’ definition of civil society (the LSE one provided above). However, just because this is the definition that is most frequently used doesn’t mean that it is the definition that will be most useful to you. Indeed, in the first session of the symposium we are going to discuss the definitions of ‘civil society’ and ‘governance’. As you read over the rest of this section you might want to consider whether some of the dilemmas outlined could be avoided if we used a different definition of civil society; or, perhaps even, if we were to replace the term with others more specific and more tailored to the work we are doing.

### *Better Governance through Civil Society*

A variety of distinct but interrelated roles are commonly identified for civil society in bringing about better governance. Below I detail four of these.

#### *Civil Society as a Countervailing Force*

According to proponents of this argument, an active civil society is necessary to counter-balance monopolisation of political power by private interests. In market economies, the argument runs, some form of economic inequality is inevitable, and with economic inequality comes political inequality: people and businesses with more wealth are provided with the means to exert considerably more influence over the political process than ordinary citizens. They can access the media and, through it, public opinion. They can buy political influence with campaign funding and potentially even bribes. They can hire lawyers to contest legislation they don't like, and lobbyists to pressure for legislation they do.

Against this, average citizens acting on their own may be powerless. However, when citizens act collectively, as part of civil society, they can amplify their individual voices.<sup>viii</sup> They can pool resources to hire lawyers and lobbyists of their own. They can stage protests to attract public attention. They can pressure politicians through the force of their numbers. In short, they can act as a counterbalance to other influences which may distort the political process and lead to poor governance.

#### *Civil Society as a 'Watchdog' on Government*

A closely related argument is that civil society is essential for good governance through its role as a watchdog on government itself. According to this argument, the collective weight of civil society can act as a check on governments that act to abuse the power bestowed upon them.<sup>ix</sup> Civil Society's role as a watchdog on government can take many different forms: civil society can expose and resist corrupt government officials; it can publicise and protest human rights abuses; it can take action against unpopular laws. It can also lobby governments for public goods and social services.

As with the previous argument, civil society's key asset in its role as a watchdog is its collective nature – individuals on their own can campaign against the government, but when they work together and pool resources they will normally have much more impact.

In both the 'countervailing force' and 'watchdog' arguments the point is often made that the power of collective action is most significant for the poor and vulnerable, and those who have been marginalised from formal political processes. Unless these groups act collectively they may have almost no voice in the political sphere.

#### *Associational Life*

The third common argument made for civil society's role in fostering good governance is distinctly different from the other two. This argument focuses not on civil society's direct influence on politics and policies, but rather its indirect impact on the political sphere through what it (civil society) does to us as citizens. According

to proponents of this theory, a strong and active civil society instils in its members, “habits of cooperation and public spiritedness, as well as the practical skills necessary to partake in public life”.<sup>x</sup> In addition to this, it is argued that civil society organisations can encourage reciprocity and foster greater social trust by providing us with spaces where we interact with those who are not just our immediate neighbours and family, and a manner which is not solely driven by our own self-interest. All of these citizen attributes (trust, reciprocity, etc) are considered essential to well functioning democracies.

One point about this third theory that is important to note is that, to its advocates, all CSOs are important, not just those that are directly political. To proponents of this theory, a sports league can do as much to incubate good citizens as an advocacy NGO.

### *Complicating Factors*

Each of the above arguments for civil society’s role in improved governance is intuitive and it is easy to think of examples which may serve as evidence of their validity. However, there are also good reasons to believe that the relationship between civil society and governance may be more complicated than it initially appears.

#### *Civil Society and Un-Civil Society*

When one thinks about the LSE definition of civil society for any length of time it becomes apparent that a vast array of different organisations meet the criteria specified, and that there is no reason to think that they will all have the same objectives (consider the differing views of ‘pro-choice’ and ‘pro-life’ CSOs on the issue of abortion); or that their objectives may necessarily be conducive to good governance at all. The often-cited example of a civil society organisation with a harmful impact on governance is the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).<sup>xi</sup> Under many definitions of civil society the KKK would count as a CSO, yet it’s influence on governance has been profoundly negative. It has intimidated citizens and politicians, and at times been actively violent – all in the name of the political and economic disenfranchisement of a significant section of the population of the United States. Similarly, the notorious Rwandan Interahamwe would meet some definitions of a CSO, yet it was an agent of genocide rather than good governance.

It is also possible to think of less extreme cases where CSOs may impede rather than assist good governance. Business associations may lobby against the interests of the poor and marginal, while competing interest groups (particularly when they are focused around existing societal fault lines such as religion or race) may foster mistrust rather than trust. It is even possible that perfectly laudable CSOs may end up distorting the political process if they manage to capture too larger slice of the political sphere.

### *CSOs and the Power of the State*

When discussing the impact that CSOs can have on governments and governance it is important to remember that influence flows both ways. Through the laws they make, the money they spend, and the social environment they create, governments can exert immense influence on civil society. One need look no further than the ongoing arrest and harassment of civil society activists in Fiji for an example of this. Fiji, unfortunately, is not unique. CIVICUS (the CSO of which, Kumi Naidoo, our other keynote speaker, is director general) runs a programme called Civil Society Watch, which exists to monitor and respond to threats to CSOs around the world. The most recent issue of their monthly newsletter details legal repression of CSOs in Palestine, violent government crackdowns on civil society protesters in Burma, the government closure of a human rights group in Egypt, the murder of the children of human rights activists in Guatemala, the arrest of activists in Zimbabwe and numerous other cases of governments denying CSOs and CSO members their basic rights.<sup>xii</sup>

Less overtly, governments can impact on civil society through a myriad of legal means, including how they define charitable status and the extent of the bureaucracy that CSOs need to work within. Also, governments may often fund CSOs to provide social and other services. This, in turn, can bring with it potential influence.

At the very least, the fact that governments can exert so much influence over civil society ought to challenge simple assumptions about better governance being directly brought about by strengthening civil society.

### *Cultural Context*

A third issue which may complicate assumptions about civil society's role in improving governance has to do with the cultural applicability of the concept. The idea of civil society, at least in relation to standard definitions of the term, stems primarily from European and North American political thought and is strongly connected to the social, political and economic arrangements of these parts of the world. In particular, it relates to a system where there is space between the state, the market and families for civil society to form. In some parts of the world it is questionable to what extent this same space actually exists. Consider, for example, a small village society which is strongly dominated by family ties and traditional governance systems. Is it actually possible for civil society (particularly the western model of civil society that has been outlined in this document) to function, or to be effective, in a cultural environment like this? At the very least, in some parts of the world, the nature and make up of civil society may be very different from that which we are familiar with. In some countries civil society may be limited almost exclusively to faith-based organisations such as churches and mosques. Such organisations might still have an important role to play in better governance but it may be a distinctly different role from that which we associate with NGOs or even sports leagues.<sup>xiii</sup> It is also possible that in different cultural environments the favourable influence on governance which civil society arguably provides may be achieved through other social processes altogether.

### *Looking Ahead*

Having noted all these complicating factors it is important to emphasise that none of them necessarily negate the hypothesis that civil society has an important role to play in improving governance. Just because some CSOs may have a negative impact on governance does not mean that others do not play a positive and essential role in bringing about better government. Similarly, while civil society may struggle under repressive governments, numerous CSOs do still exist in such environments and often achieve much (sometimes even the end of repressive regimes). And, finally, while civil society can be argued to be a concept born of western political and economic conditions, CSOs now exist in almost every country on earth and, while some may have different forms from those that we are familiar with, this does not necessarily mean that they have no role to play in improving governance. More than anything else, these complicating factors illustrate the need for careful consideration of civil society and what it can do to improve governance, which is precisely what we hope to engage in over the two days of our event.

---

<sup>i</sup> UN Millennium Project. 2005, *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals (Overview)*, Earthscan, London, 16.

<sup>ii</sup> AusAID, 2000. *Good Governance: Guiding Principles for Implementation*, Accessed online at: [http://www.ausaid.gov.au/publications/pdf/good\\_governance.pdf](http://www.ausaid.gov.au/publications/pdf/good_governance.pdf), 3

<sup>iii</sup> For example: R. Putnam, R. Leonardi & R. Nanetti, 1994. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey

<sup>iv</sup> London School of Economics, n.d. *What is Civil Society?*, Accessed online at: [http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what\\_is\\_civil\\_society.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm)

<sup>v</sup> For example: P.M Swain. 1999. *Civil Society and Development: Pacific Island Case Studies*, Unpublished PhD. Dissertation, Massey University.

<sup>vi</sup> M. Edwards. 2004, *Civil Society*, Polity Press, Cambridge

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> R. Putnam. 2000, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> CIVICUS. 2007, *Civil Society Watch Monthly Bulletin – September 2007*, Accessed online at: [http://www.civicus.org/new/content/CSWMB\\_September\\_No28.htm](http://www.civicus.org/new/content/CSWMB_September_No28.htm)

<sup>xiii</sup> For some useful case studies of civil society operating in different cultural environments see: M Ottaway & Carothers T (eds), 2000, *Funding Virtue: civil society and democracy promotion*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington.