The Concept of Civil Society and Its Significance on Development Practice

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The increasing role of civil society in development has challenged the very idea of mainstream development in which state as central actor and infrastructure development is the primary focus. The people-centred development encouraged by civil society and NGO’s has contributed to bring the development back to the people, but in doing so, NGO’s may be perceived as the challenger of the state rather than the complimentary partner of the state.

Introduction

The concept of civil society has become increasingly important and gained much greater acknowledgment in development studies in recent years. The unequal distribution of wealth in the face of economic development has made development policy thinkers realize that economic growth is insufficient by itself. Now, many scholars and practitioners consider development to be as much an institutional and organizational phenomenon as it is an economic one (Roberts, 2005). Development in a broader context regards the creation of civil society to be as significant as economic improvement.

This essay argues that the concept of civil society is a vital part of human development in particular and of development generally. Building civil society touches all other human development issues such as democratic governance, the organization of social capital, eradication of poverty and the role of culture in development. I agree with Edwards that the concept of civil society does offer both a touchstone for social movements and practical framework for organizing resistance and alternative solutions to social, economic and political problems (Edwards, 2004).

I would also argue that the concept of civil society is significantly enhanced through the globalization process, along with democracy, human rights, good governance and other development-related issues.

To achieve the objective(s), I will start by reviewing the contemporary debates about civil society and its definition. Secondly, I will highlight some important issues about civil society and its significance to development issues. Finally, I will explain
why non-government organizations (NGOs) play a significant role in strengthening civil society.

*The Concept of Civil Society*

Having set these broader parameters, this essay will now engage in current intellectual debates around the concept of civil society. The definition of civil society for most scholars, social activists and development practitioners is a ‘collection of diverse interest groups and social organizations that is strong enough to provide some autonomy and protection to individuals from authoritarian and hegemonic tendencies of states.’ Broadly, civil society underscores the importance of markets and liberal states to independent social life (Krieger, 2001). While Hegel (Blackburn, 2005) simply stated that civil society is ‘forms of social association intermediate between the family and the states’, such definitions lack detail and specificity. Nonetheless, they do emphasize that researchers do not have a general consensus of the theory and construct of civil society.

For example, the sociologist Adam Seligman expresses strong doubts on the concept of civil society and finds that the concept adds little more to the methodological toolbox than do concepts of liberal citizenship or democracy. He also points out the problem of definition: ‘in this contemporary 'revival' of the idea of civil society, the concept has come to mean different things to different people ....the resulting picture is one the great ambiguity and not a little confusion...’ Seligman concludes that the concept of civil society cannot provide an adequate solution to the contemporary impasse: ‘Whether the concept of civil society itself as either an analytic idea or a normative ideal brings us farther [sic] towards (sic) resolution is...open to serious question' (Bernard and Helmich, 1998).

Not surprisingly, it is not easy for a public policy maker to give a clear working definition of civil society. For instance, the Libreville Declaration includes the private sector as one of the actors in civil society. However, this definition brings confusion to the distinction between market and civil society. Government, of course, does not find any problem in encouraging the development of the private sector, a sentiment that is not necessarily shared by empowering non-state actors such NGOs and the mass media (Bernard and Helmich, 1998). In contrasting an operationalisable approach to civil society, however, it makes sense to narrow the definition so that it embraces primary non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) emphasizing public
rather than private goals, or more specifically, voluntary groups concerned *inter alia* with influencing state policy (Hulme and Edwards 1997)

*Civil Society, Globalization and Development Strategies*

The growing recognition of civil society cannot exist without the process of globalization. On a functional level, globalization has increased the interconnection of the world and its people. Norms and values are shared globally and regarded as common ground. Ideas and concepts coming from the Western world, in particular, are spread widely by the rapid development of communication technologies, including the high regard placed on the concept of civil society as a means and an ends to human development. Martin Albrow (Solomon and Scuderi, 2002) argues that globalization has turned communities into a ‘single world society, global society’.

However, the openness required by globalization does not necessary guarantee growth and more equitable income distribution. Indeed, some regard globalization as actually promoting inequality within and between countries (Solomon and Scuderi, 2002).

The failure of globalization to bring the theory of ‘trickle down effect’ into reality, and the fact that poverty and inequality remain entrenched worldwide, have brought acknowledgement that globalization has failed to bring development for all. The argument of ‘trickle down effect’ which implies that through the current form of globalization, wealth, technology transfer, knowledge sharing and economies of scale will be shared and enjoyed by all is actually working in reverse in most developing nations.

The consequences of globalization have become a key concern of development scholars and practitioners. An increasing number of people in poverty, particularly in the third world, have led to conservative, growth-centered development theory and policies being questioned in search of better development strategies. In light of this the concept of civil society, in which emphasis is placed on people’s participation, has been incorporated in development strategies and this will be discussed briefly.

Conservative growth strategies highlight capital investment as the source of economic growth. People’s participation is only accounted in their economic functions as laborers and consumers. To address the need for growth with equity, some development strategies try to incorporate people’s participation but do so only
in a limited way. They deliver public services, with no involvement in planning or controlling. In response, recent development strategies, favored by most NGOs, advocate people-centered development. Korten in his recent work underlines the need for a shift from growth-oriented to people-centered development strategies. This shift implies giving first priority to the fulfillment of the basic needs of the poor which, in turn, requires that the rich in the world reduce their consumption to a sustainable level (Korten 1990, in Martinussen, 1997).

In people-centered development, participation takes different meaning in policy agendas. Its objective is to reverse the tendency towards concentrating power in impersonal and unaccountable institutions, returning it to people and communities and ensuring its equitable distribution (Bauzon, 1992). Theories of people’s participation envisage that people can, and should, play a role in development planning and implementation, but again, there is a tendency to reduce individual citizens to actors with only marginal influence and subordinate role (Martinussen, 1997). Hence, the essential part of the policy agenda of people-centered development is that people have constant access to decision-making power (UNDP, 1993). It encourages people to participate effectively through forms of civil society.

Theories of people-centered (managed) development do not claim that people have, so far, played more prominent roles in aggregate societal development than described in mainstream theories. However, they claim, on the one hand, that people have effectively managed their own development at the micro-level to a significantly higher degree than is recognized in mainstream thinking, and on the other, that people ought to play much more prominent roles at the macro level, because that is the only way genuine progress and improvement can be attained (Martinussen, 1997). The problem now, perhaps, is finding how to replicate people-centered types of development effort from local communities to higher levels of social organization.

People-centered development also places human development as integral part of its theoretical framework. Human development stresses the need to invest in human capabilities and then ensure that these capabilities are used for the benefit of all (UNDP, 1993). Greater participation plays a vital role here, as it helps to maximize the use of human capabilities and is thus a means of increasing levels of social and economic development (UNDP, 1993). Greater participation also means enabling people to gain for themselves access to a much broader range of opportunities (UNDP, 1993). As participation is a key factor in people-centered development
strategies, and consequently civil society, an important environment where effective participation can be exercised plays critical role.

Civil Society and Democracy

Civil society is also a significant determinant of the overall character of democratic transitions and post-democratization polities. (Kamrava, 2000). Transition to a viable democracy can be greatly facilitated by the prior existence of civil society (Kamrava, 2000).

Friedman in his book elaborated his normative theory on inclusive democracy using the more extensive theory of civil society. His main interest was to identify conditions that excluded poor people from decision-making and prevented them from getting a fair share of society’s resources. The strategy Friedman proposed centered around empowerment of the poor and devolution of powers to local authorities which should, at the same time, be made accountable to the majority of their citizens – that is the poor people in their areas of jurisdiction (Friedman, 1992 in Martinussen, 1997).

Democracy basically demands strong institutions of civil society (such as a free press) and diversity of NGOs (such as the environmental groups and corporate watchdog groups that have had such an impact in many countries in recent years. (UNDP 1993). However, democracy can merely be an empty ritual of periodic elections unless people participate, in an aware and empowered fashion, in all the institutions of civil society. Elections are necessary, but are certainly not a sufficient condition for democracy. Political participation is not just the casting of votes. Even where citizens can elect their leaders in regular, free and fair elections, they seldom have achieved political participation. If people in developing countries are to influence development, the trends towards democracy will have to widen and deepen (UNDP, 1993).

Hence, the process of democratization can be significantly assisted by the presence of civil society. However, civil society may not always usher in a democratic transition; the state may put up an effective fight and hang on to the reins of power. A viable democracy requires civil society, but civil society in itself does not necessarily mean democratization. Kamrava (Kamrava, 2002) argues that to have democratic consequences, civil society organizations must embark on democratizing themselves and the larger social and political environment within which they operate.
Furthermore, it needs to be recognized that the transition towards democratically elected governments does not, in itself; guarantee a society with greater political participation, and other aspects of political culture must be considered (Bernard and Helmich, 1998). In most new democracies, not only the state but also the civil society is weak (Przeworski, 1995). As a result, civil society has been rediscovered as a necessary precondition of democratic society (Bernard and Helmich, 1998).

Presently, civil society is increasingly recognized as being vital to the successful realization of development. Countries, in response, are increasingly encouraging the development of the institutions of civil society, including: a fair judiciary, a responsive executive, a free press and a tradition of transparency, accountability and fair play (UNDP 1993). Here, a strong civil society supports democracy by deepening policy accountability to its citizens. In a negative sense the state must be kept from abuse and venality, but in positive sense, in accountability the state must be responsive to the needs and want of its people (Hulme and Edwards, 1997). However, too much interest group influence on the state, which emerges in the name of civil society, might lead to the immobilism and a hardening of democratic arteries or ‘gridlock’ rather to a rich a vibrant democratic polity (Hulme and Edwards, 1997).

So far, focus on civil society also reflects a growing awareness of the importance of local institutions in supporting and undertaking development. Development agencies, such as the UNDP and World Bank, concerned with objectives such as poverty reduction and good governance, often consider it crucial to strengthen local institutions that are able to work independently to ensure that government policies and programs are effective. Such institutions, out of direct government control and committed to a range of often diverse (and sometimes contradictory) objectives to increase the well-being of one or more groups in society, have become loosely associated with the term “civil society” (Bernard and Helmich, 1998). As forms of civil society, NGO’s are playing significant role in strengthening the institutions of civil society.

The role of NGO’s as form of civil society

Miltin (Bernard and Helmich, 1998), in her article, gives examples of civil society as diverse forms of institution, including: non-governmental organizations,
non-profit making associations, informal organizations addressing issues of public interest and self-help groups. Furthermore, she gives definition of NGO’s as professional, non-profit, non-membership intermediary organizations which are independent of the state and which undertake a range of activities in order to further development objectives (Bernard and Helmich, 1998). According to a UNDP report in 1993, NGO’s can be defined as voluntary organizations that work with and very often on behalf of others. NGO’s have often been singled out by both local and international development workers as having the ability to play an important intermediary role in the effort to empower the people and gain their participation in development (UNDP, 1993). In recent years, NGO’s have become a conduit for resources, influence and ideas flowing from people to government, and government to people. (MacPherson and Wong, 1998).

Moreover, NGO’s have a special role to play with respect to civil society organization and the state, because they are willing to be advocates for all civil society and because they frequently act as interlocutors among civil society organizations and between these organizations and the state. They seek to bring different parties together and re-align the relationships among them in order to achieve the NGO’s objectives for development. In many countries, NGO’s have struggled to make the state more accountable and more inclusive of different social groups (Bernard and Helmich, 1998). However, strong criticism from NGO’s may result in the state perceiving NGO’s as a threat to its legitimacy. It may also lead to unhealthy competition between the state and NGO’s to gain people’s trust, especially at the local community level. Perhaps what should be realized here is that NGO’s can help improve the functioning of government and vice versa, and NGO’s generally work better under strong legitimate governments rather than weak ones.

In contrast with official development approaches which emphasize infrastructural development, commercial benefit, and creation of industrial development opportunities for exporters, the NGO vision of development generally embraces a commitment to both the social and economic welfare of people (Jones and Wunder, 1995 in MacPherson and Wong, 1998). It is claimed by NGO’s that this approach embodies a strong sense of politically and economically based democracy which is grounded in grassroots participation – participation with and by the people. As well as aiming to improve the quality of life for impoverished communities, NGO’s claim they seek to redress social injustices by strengthening the capacity of
people in developing countries to facilitate structural changes to allow their communities and indigenous organizations to focus on their needs and priorities (UN, 1992 in MacPherson and Wong, 1998).

Some NGO’s are at the forefront of the democratization process that has transformed several countries in Asia, and it is well recognized that NGO’s have enabled people to be empowered through their engagement with communities. Educational and organizational activities undertaken by many NGO’s have the effect of empowering local communities, sectoral alliances, and marginalized group of society. NGO’s often are the symbols of promoting people’s participation. Genuine grassroots activity by NGO’s has been a means of empowering people and elevating their economic status. (MacPherson and Wong, 1998) However, even if NGO’s are seen to promote democracy, NGO’s often sideline existing democratic institution and create group of their own design. In India, the tendency to belittle the work of political parties by pointing out that politicians are corrupt, combined with the Gandian ideal of ‘going to the villagers’ to build a true and direct democracy, makes it convenient for NGO’s to circumvent the elected bodies (Lindberg and Sverrisson, 1997). Therefore, there should be awareness that NGO’s activities might create disharmony among already existing institutions.

A second important role of NGOs centers on the need to develop partnerships with government in the developing process, i.e. as intermediary organizations between people and government, and between people’s organizations and government agencies. NGO’s are often able to bridge differences between these entities and provide communication linkages. They have also been able to provide constructive critiques of government plans for community development, and because NGO’s have often been close to the community and part of the community, they have been able to instigate changes to those plans (MacPherson and Wong, 1998).

Addressing fundamental inequalities of power and resources by speaking out in favour of particular groups, organizing to defend the interest of poor people, and lobbying government for policy change, has always been central to NGO mission. Many of largest and most respected international NGO’s today (such as Save the Children and Oxfam) were born and raised in opposition to government policy and vested interests at the time. However, these roles are in question if NGO’s continue becoming more and more dependent on government support. Increasing reliance on government contract is already hindering the campaigning work of the larger NGO’s
in the USA and UK. A context in which NGO’s compete with each other for official support seems unlikely to foster the collaborative relationships on which successful policy alliances are built (Convey, 1995 in Hulme and Edwards, 1997).

In addition, the concern of poverty and the need to minimize it, and ideally to eliminate it entirely, is no longer an isolated local problem, but with the growth of nationalism and capitalism, it has become part of broader social problem for the state. Initially, NGO’s attempted to promote ‘bottom up’ development efforts that improved the ability of local organizations to solve national problems and, in this way, proposed more radical reforms than those put forward by governments. (MacPherson and Wong, 1998).

Interestingly, part of the attraction of the civil society project for NGOs lies in the clear role it delineates for them as international nonstate actors. International civil society is becoming the arena for social activism in a system that is seen as increasingly interconnected or "global," a system in which the state's capacity to regulate or effect change has diminished. In the NGOs' view, globalization means that states can no longer be the chief focus for transformative social reform projects; NGOs themselves are the principal vehicles for global change (Grugel, 2000).

Conclusion

To sum up, the concept of civil society deserves very serious attention. Even there is no consensus of about what civil society is, it certain from the discussion above that civil society will generally be benefit to social capital, sustainable democracy, eradication of poverty and at the end a key success to long term sustainable development. The debate surrounding the role of civil society and NGO’s should not be focus on its role vis a vis state, but how the NGO’s could be more effective in complementing the state role rather than replacing or challenging it in the development arena.
REFERENCES


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