CIVIL SOCIETY: A CRITICAL INTERROGATION

Background Paper for INTRAC's 10th Anniversary Conference, 13th-15th December 2001, Balliol College Oxford.

***'Changing expectations? The concept and Practice of Civil Society in International Development'*.**

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3rd December 2001

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In its first encounter with development, civil society was used in a very unsophisticated way by development thinkers, practitioners and activists. It often meant NGOs, for instance. Donors and NGOs used it quite instrumentally. If it had remained there, the concept might have disappeared rapidly. However, time and effort have been invested in its meaning and importance since the early 1990s. A great deal has been written on the concept, but this has not always helped clarify why it could be considered an essential component to development processes in the South.

The underlying premise of this paper is that there are two main approaches to civil society, which we call the mainstream approach and the alternative approach. Each selectively draws upon distinct intellectual traditions and finds expression in particular development agencies and practices. For multilateral banks, international development institutions, governments, and, it should be noted, some large international NGOs, poverty and inequality are recognised problems of the global economy today. But they are problems which can be solved with the right set of policies. This mainstream civil society thinking draws on a particular history of the concept which makes it relevant to a problem-solving agenda of this type. Increasingly it appeals for partnership in the building of a consensual approach to development between civil society, the market and the state. It is concerned with the risk to social cohesion from the unfettered pursuit of individual gain in the market, and has begun to talk in terms of "socially responsible capitalism".

Grass-roots movements and change-oriented NGOs look to an alternative genealogy of the concept, which articulates a critical approach to the global economy. The "right" set of problem-solving policies is not sufficient, they would argue. Another set of values and priorities should guide the economy and the development process within it. Rather than partnership, they seek to show the embedded power relationships and inequalities which make development an often conflictual rather than consensual process. They query the extent to which the pursuit of commercial interest and gain is compatible with social and ethical responsibility to the wider society.

Neither the mainstream nor the alternative approaches are coherent or unitary. There are multiple discourses and nuances within each one. Nonetheless we use these ideal types to explore the difference it makes to policy and practice. In emphasising, but unfairly dichotomising the multiple meanings that exist, we are attempting to underline our point that the concept is normative and should be problematised rather than applied uncritically.

This paper thus explores critically some of the implicit assumptions made by donors about the relationship between civil society, democratisation and the market[i]. It suggests that there is a mainstream and an alternative imagining of civil society, which have implications for the nature of donor intervention and its potential outcomes. The paper considers some of the key issues arising out of current donor attempts to strengthen civil society. It draws particular attention to the politics of plurality and choice, the politics of conceptual and organisational universality, and the politics of autonomy and dependence. In the light of this analysis the paper suggests how to move forward with the idea of civil society.

Democracy and civil society

Donors start out with two implicit assumptions, namely, that democracy contributes positively toward development and that civil society is an important democratic check upon the state. The debate on the relationship between development and democracy which emerged in the academic literature and policy debates of the 1980s was, in fact, inconclusive in establishing any straightforward correlations. This was despite some sophisticated quantitative and qualitative efforts to do so[ii]. Much of the debate was actually around the role of the state in development rather than democracy per se, responding to the critique of the developmental state which underpinned the rise of neo-liberalism. The policy community was searching for tools of development practice that did not depend on such a state and which might actively foster the non-state arena. It was seeking explanations for the failure of structural adjustment policies to generate desired economic outcomes. Rather than challenge the basic tenets of SAPS, some donors blamed the failure of these on inefficient, corrupt and authoritarian Southern states. This led donors in the early 1990s to apply new forms of political conditionality to loans and technical assistance aimed at improving the democratic governance of Southern governments. The idea that a more democratic and accountable state could foster economic growth and development and allow the market to operate freely accorded with the thinking of the time.

However, state reform programmes ran into many problems, including the lack of internal interest in reform. The problem of how to overcome this led donors to civil society, which by the late 1980s had already been constructed as a benign arena in contrast to the malign state. Housed within civil society was a potential agency in the form of NGOs and later other non-state groups. They were the ones that campaigned for respect for human rights, against corruption and who sought to ensure that governments were accountable to society. In the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, US foundations and institutions began a serious programme of "democracy building" in Eastern Europe, which strengthened the policy connections between market liberalisation, civil society and democracy (Quigley, 1997). Civil society assistance could encourage external pressure on states for reform. Moreover, as the overall foreign aid budget in the US fell in the first half of the 1990s: "funding citizen activism seemed to hold out the promise of a low-cost way to achieve large-scale effects. Thus civil society programs grew as aid budgets shrank"(Carothers, 1999: 209).

Against this background key donor agencies enthusiastically embraced Robert Putnam's efforts to provide evidence of the nature of the relationship between civil society and democracy and its potential transference to the field of development. Before the publication of his book in 1993 and subsequent articles, assumptions were already being made about this relationship but often rather crudely posing civil society against the state. Putnam and other institutional theorists and neo-Tocquevillians were able to supply an apparently more rigorous set of arguments about precisely how active associations and civic engagement contributed to democratic polities and how this facilitated economic progress and prosperity.

Not all donor institutions, foundations and individual policy-makers are directly or entirely influenced by Putnam's prescriptions. European donors, for instance, are embedded in distinct histories and cultures and have different perceptions of the role

of states and social organisations. They are more likely to recognise the historical and political role of trade unions, churches and other bodies in struggling for democratisation and state reform in different parts of the world[iii]. Today European donors see the same potential in southern NGOs and grass-roots movements and acknowledge to some extent power differentials and inequalities and the importance of political action in reforming the state.

However, the influence of Putnam's argument is pervasive and has strongly shaped US donor thinking about the relationship between civil society and democracy. "Making democracy work" rather than "making democracy happen" is what matters, or policy outcomes rather than political processes. This approach owes much to American visions of its own past. The ideas established by Alexis Tocqueville in his writings about democracy in America in the early nineteenth century have been appropriated by contemporary US scholars in their conceptualisation of the relationship between civil society and democracy. The influence of these ideas on donor thinking is admirably summarised by Thomas Carothers in his study of democracy aid programmes. US donors he argues:

> "held to a denatured, benevolent view of civil society's role in political life as town hall politics writ large – the earnest articulation of interests by legions of well-mannered activists who play by the rules, settle conflicts peacefully, and not break any windows. This romanticization of civil society has roots in Americans' rather mythicized Tocquevillian conception of their own society, but it entails a gross oversimplification of the makeup and roles of civil society in other countries around the world (Carothers, 1999: 248-249)".

Putnam's work represents a conscious neo-Tocquevillian revival with the additional influence of "new institutionalism". This body of literature makes institutions both a dependent variable, that is, shaped by history, and an independent variable, that is, affecting political outcomes. It is ultimately concerned with "the conditions for creating strong, representative, effective institutions"(Putnam, 1993a: 6).

Putnam's influence grew in the 1990s because of the connections he made between the conclusions of his study of Italy and the decline of social capital in the United States (Putnam 1993b, 1995, 1996). The impact of his work on the policy community has been huge. However, his work has also been criticised, for overlooking the role of political parties in fostering associations, for its emphasis on outcomes rather than processes and for its failure to distinguish between the democratic and anti-democratic norms, values and practices that circulate in different networks and associations.

The US approach to civil society and democracy ultimately views the task of "civil society" as system maintenance, or the creation or strengthening of the democratic institutions which protect the rule of law and legitimate peaceful opposition, and the expression of dissent in acceptable ways. But in many respects it is itself a deeply conservative vision where political stability is as important as political freedom, and protection from the state more important than positive conceptualisations, debate and action around how best to develop the common interests of a society. Pluralities serve to check the excesses of government. They preserve negative liberty. They

defend the individual against the mass. They aggregate and articulate demands and interests ensuring that they can be defended and negotiated. They preserve a civic culture.

However, there are different approaches to democracy and its relationship with civil society, one such being the radical continental European tradition. This tradition has a a particular ongoing influence on many grass roots organisations and development NGOs. Three themes distinguish it from the Americanised discussion of civil society and democracy. These are the search for the “common good”; the pursuit of human emancipation; and the identification of conditions for inclusive rational-critical public debate. Taken together, they challenge the assumption that a vibrant civil society, a strong democracy and economic progress and development are conceptually or empirically connected in an unproblematic way. For many grass-roots organisations and NGOs, civil society is an arena to debate and challenge the prevailing ideas of progress and development through active participation in non-formal and non-institutionalised political spaces. Many do not therefore seek merely to strengthen existing democratic institutions or to defend civil society against the state, but to promote new forms of participation where they can have a say in deciding what form progress and development should take. Taken together, the implications of this alternative vision, we argue, point to the need for a renewal of debate on the role of the state, who should define that role and how, and the way that the state and society inter-relate.

In this continental European tradition of radical reflection, theorists struggle with the way social and economic inequalities impinge on the exercise of meaningful citizenship. Pluralities can often preserve particular interests to the detriment of collective or public interest. They mask the source of real power and create illusions about political participation and the role of the state. Marxist intellectuals had long disparaged civil society as yet another arena dominated by powerful economic interests. By the late twentieth century, however, the left had suspended its negativity towards the idea of civil society and recognised the potential of autonomous social action as a contribution to social and political change. Civil society could be the source of a regenerated public sphere, where non-instrumental communication might potentially place the public interest on the agenda, without suppressing pluralities and differences. It could be the source of new and constructive thinking about the state and development as well as the source of critique of capitalist development.

Translating this possibility into the real material world of exploitation and poverty in the South remains a considerable challenge. The liberal tradition makes us think about the importance of autonomous public political spaces. Donors within this tradition could help defend such spaces and foster the conditions for an inclusive associational life, such as funding education, the rule of law, economic opportunities. The continental European tradition leads us to the question, how do those marginalised and excluded in the process of development themselves participate in those spaces and what could happen if and when they do.

Civil society, the state, and the market

Since the late 1980s the democratic potential of civil society has captured and dominated the imaginations of donors. In contrast far less attention has been given to the relationship between civil society and the market. Donor discourse on civil society tends to highlight the tensions between civil society and the state on the one hand and the state and the market on the other, whilst the relationship between the market and civil society is implicitly viewed as benign, harmonious and complementary.

In his critique of contemporary civil society theory Fine (1997:9) deplores the loss of a critical engagement with the concept that had characterised Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinking and cautions against the privileging of civil society over the state and market. The anti-state model of civil society in turn leads to a tendency amongst donors to assume rather than query the relationship between civil society and the market, so failing to explore critically the tensions and contradictions implicit in this relationship. Varty (quoted in Fine,1997:30) presents this as an historical paradox: "Much of the historical development of the concept civil society has taken place from within the tradition of political economy yet there has been an exclusion of political economy from contemporary civil society debates". In this section we, first, explore the relationship between civil society and the market which remains largely unproblematised and unquestioned in mainstream donor discourse; and second, focus more closely upon some of the assumptions which socially responsible capitalism makes about civil society and market relations and which dominate mainstream donor thinking.

Starting with the relationship between civil society and the market, we suggest that two broad sets of ideas about the relationship between civil society and the market have begun to crystallise in the 1990s. In different ways these express a dissatisfaction with the socio-economic consequences of unrestrained capitalism advocated by neo-liberals and a disillusion with state-led development processes, whether of the Keynesian or state socialist variety. They are part of the paradigmatic shift towards state, civil society and the market, the new triadic model of development. While one broad set of ideas endorses the consensual nature of the triadic unity and presumes a fundamentally positive relationship between civil society and the market, the other set highlights the essentially conflictual character of the trinity and questions the assumed mutuality of civil society and the market. We characterise the first approach as `socially responsible capitalism’ and the second as `alternatives to capitalism’. These emerged out of the two geneaologies in civil society thinking, namely, the mainstream and alternative versions. The terms `socially responsible capitalism’ and `alternatives to capitalism’ serve as a conceptual shorthand for a range of similar ideas, policies and practices concerned with the social processes of economic production. The ideas of socially responsible capitalism have strongly influenced mainstream donor thinking since the 1990s and tend to dominate current thinking in development research and practice. Ideas about alternatives to capitalism circulate more among grassroots activists, social movements and some non-governmental organisations in the North and South, challenging dominant constructions of development.

Our second concern in this section is with some of the assumptions which socially responsible capitalism makes about civil society and market relations and which dominate mainstream donor thinking. Socially responsible capitalism assumes that

civil society and market economies are positively related and that civil society and the market operate as separate, autonomous spheres. Civil society thus emerges as a way of resolving the contradictions and tensions of capitalism and in particular its atomising, unequalising and exclusionary effects. These effects have pre-occupied political thinkers from the Enlightenment onwards when civil society was first separated conceptually from the state. Contemporary experience of welfare-statism, actually existing socialism and globalisation have in turn revitalised these issues.

However, we challenge these assumptions on four counts. First, we argue that capitalist development does not inevitably and naturally give rise to a vibrant, autonomous civil society. It is assumed that because civil society in its modern as opposed to classical form[iv] emerged out of, and alongside capitalism, civil society is thus both a natural product of and an integral component of a capitalist economy. Historically civil society expresses the dissolution of traditional bonds of solidarity and association and the emergence of new forms of social integration in the context of capitalist modernisation. We take issue with this assumed causality and teleology. We suggest that the emergence of an oppositional civil society in state socialism reflects a political rather than an economic logic rooted in the development of capitalism. In the 1950s and 1960s the tightly controlled civil societies of Eastern Europe sporadically challenged the authoritarianism of the Stalinist regimes and the dominance of the Soviet Union. As the Eastern European economies began to stagnate during the late 1970s and early 1980s, intellectuals, workers and others began to debate alternatives and to organise, often under the shelter of the Catholic and Protestant churches or through other means. The demands for democracy during the 1980s reflected both the increasing strength of a frustrated civil society as well as the despair of system reformers in the possibility of changing the system from within. Initially these were movements which called for new forms of self-management of the socialist economy, not for market-oriented economies. The clamour for civil society, however, paralleled growing pressure for market alternatives to state planning, bolstering the notion that political and economic liberalisation were intrinsically connected and marginalising alternative reflection. Thus the emergence of civil society in Eastern Europe arose out of a political rather than market logic.

In addition, the co-existence of successful capitalist economies with authoritarian civil or military regimes challenges the inevitability of a positive dynamic between capitalism and civil society. The case of the Four Little Tigers, namely, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea well exemplifies this apparent anomaly. The weaker thesis that civil society is a societal feature of economic growth also does not hold. China has experienced staggering rates of GDP growth in the reform period, averaging out at eight per cent annually (World Bank, 1997:1). It has made significant strides in raising standards of living and reducing rural poverty. Compared to India and Bangladesh, however, the extent of non-state organisations is limited. However, while Bangladesh has a vibrant civil society with a plethora of local NGOs and international NGOs, it remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Similarly despite being the so-called `world's largest democracy' and home to a multitude of local charities, NGOs and advocacy groups, India has substantial levels of poverty and illiteracy, considerably higher than that of China. Hence we find market economies sitting comfortably alongside both liberal democratic regimes with a vibrant associational life and authoritarian regimes with sharply constricted civil societies. Poor market economies with pluralistic and dynamic civil society

organisations contrast with dynamic developing market economies with limited civil societies. This thus challenges the assumptions that a market economy necessarily gives birth to and expands a civil society, that a flourishing civil society is an integral component of a capitalist economy and that civil society serves as a political counterweight to the state. In other words whilst market economies can provide fertile soil for civil society organisations, this is not always the case.

Second, we suggest that the assumed boundaries between civil society and the market are not clear-cut, undermining the acclaimed autonomy and separateness of civil society. While the autonomy of civil society from the state has received much attention in the literature, its conceptual and empirical separation and independence from the market is assumed rather than proven. Though there is a continuing debate as to whether the market is best included or excluded from civil society, and in particular whether companies are, or are not, part of civil society, the complexities of the civil society/market axis in the tripartite consensus model remain undertheorised and unproblematised.

However the trinity of civil society, market and state has not always dominated political thinking. Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers in the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries started with a bipartite model of the state and civil/economic society. It was only in the twentieth century that civil society and the economy began to be conceptually distinguished as autonomous spheres. In the neo-liberal model civil society and the economy are de-coupled to the extent that the material basis of civil society and the negative effects of the market on civil society are erased from view. In contrast the radical, alternative vision highlights the potential negative and destructive effects of the economy on civil society and seeks to understand the dynamics of power relations in capitalist societies.

As donors and scholars struggled to define civil society and delineate its empirical referents, they made an important conceptual distinction between civil society and the market. This consolidated the conceptual trinity and, in doing so, also marked a decisive break with the reductionist conceptualisation of civil society/economy relations. The key distinguishing concept here was `non-profit'. Through the criterion of non-profit it now became possible to place organisations within the realm of either market or civil society, thus separating once and for all civil society from the economy.

However there is a paradox here for though civil society appears to reach its final destiny as a separate conceptual sphere from the market, its definition in terms of `non-profit' reduces it to a set of economic activities. So the profit sector of the market and the non-profit sector of civil society organisations are two sides of the same coin of `the economy'. The non-profit sector operates as a sphere of economic activities which generate outputs in the form of schools, universities, hospitals, clinics, soup kitchens. These in turn provide employment, income and add to the gross national product. The most comprehensive study to date of this growing non-profit sector is the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, which by 1999 had created a cross-national database on the non-profit sector of twenty-two countries (Salamon, Anheier and associates, 1999:3). A key finding of Salamon and Anheier's work is that the non-profit sector forms a major economic force in the countries under study. For example, the non-profit sector in the 22 countries under study employs almost 19 million full-time equivalent paid workers, accounting for almost 7 per cent of paid employment in Western Europe and 2.2 per cent in Latin America. The contribution of the non-profit

sector to economic life as demonstrated by Salamon and Anheier empirically validates the conceptual separation of the market economy organised around profit maximisation from civil society organised around non-profit economic activities.

There is another dimension to the problem of the apparent separateness of civil society from the market which is worth reflecting upon. While the market acquires its material base through processes of capital accumulation and the state generates revenue through the taxation, and, in some cases through its own enterprises, civil society has no obvious source of wealth. Defined as non-governmental, it should be materially independent of the state; defined as non-profit, it should not accumulate capital. This leaves it in theory dependent on sources of financing from within civil society such as membership fees, donations and service charges. Salamon and Anheier's study is again revealing for it illustrates the material dependency of civil society not only upon service fees but also upon the state and, to a lesser extent, philanthropy.

Hence, while the non-profit sector is on the one hand a sphere of economic activity, generating its own outputs and income, on the other hand its material base is linked to the state and the market, so empirically muddying the conceptual clarity of boundaries. In the tripartite conceptual model of civil society, state and market, civil society is autonomous, yet in actually existing or empirical civil societies relations between the three nodes are blurred. Normatively, civil society is one thing; empirically, it is another. Civil society is autonomous in that it has its own logic; yet it is also derivative and dependent. This point becomes particularly relevant in the context of aid-dependent countries where donor funding provides a significant input to the activities of civil society organisations, an issue which we explore in greater detail in the next section.

Third, we argue that the definition of civil society as the arena of "nonprofit" weakens the political function of civil society as a critical eye on both state and market. The depiction of civil society as a separate sphere from the state and market, which is functionally, materially and socially distinct, and the elision of this normative vision with empirical reality in socially responsible capitalism serves to obscure and ultimately depoliticise the complex relations between civil society and the market. The pre-occupation with the notion of autonomy and the projection of this normative feature onto reality leads in turn to heroic attempts to precisely define and accurately measure autonomy so that it might be used as an indicator of the nature or maturity of civil society. For sceptical economists in international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the process of quantification and measurement validates the notion of civil society, giving it legitimate substance and rendering it amenable to planning. This has the effect, however, of detracting attention away from the most crucial question of all, namely, why is such autonomy so important.

The conceptual separation of civil society from the state was important, not only because it more accurately reflected empirical reality but also because it made possible the protection of this space to challenge state despotism. In nineteenth century Europe the emerging bourgeoisie dominated this space and sought to protect for their own interests the autonomy of civil society vis-a-vis a despotic state. In late twentieth century capitalism empirical civil society includes an expanding realm of service-delivery organisations as well as organisations devoted to contesting ideas, protecting political and civil rights and challenging global inequities. The space of civil society is inhabited by and contested by a diversity of groups for a much wider range of purposes. Domestic and global capital use civil society as a way to protect their

interests vis-a-vis not only the state but also labour movements, trade unions, anti-capitalist groups and environmentalists. Welfare NGOs, charities, self-help groups seek to protect civil society as a space within which to provide services, address the needs of the poor, vulnerable and marginalised and develop community-based responses to social problems. Advocacy groups, trade unions, feminists, animal rights campaigners, environmentalists and socialists likewise seek the space of civil society to challenge the power of global capital and imagine alternative ways of organising social and economic life. Civil society is both an arena for the contestation of world-views but also is itself an arena of contestation. Yet the emphasis in the discourse of socially responsible capitalism upon the service-delivery role of certain civil society organisations weakens the notion of civil society as a moral check upon the market. Though socially responsible capitalism clearly also defends the space of civil society as a way of enhancing state effectiveness, it pays lip-service to the role of civil society as a check upon the market.

In contrast the `alternatives to capitalism' approach emphasises less the non-profit dimension of civil society and more the notion of civil society as a social space within which to reflect critically upon how society organises economic production and reproduction and to experiment with such ideas. It cherishes civil society as a space for checking both the state and the market. Civil society serves politically as a point of pressure upon the state to provide decent basic public goods and to facilitate spaces for people to organise self-support groups and facilities. It also serves politically as a site from which to resist global capital, to hold transnational companies responsible for the environmental and social consequences of their economic operations and to press for democratic regulation.

The surge of interest in the growing sphere of non-profit social welfare provision and the enthusiasm of politicians, policy-makers and donors for research which testifies to this is not accidental. It legitimises a significant shift in thinking about the relative roles of the state, market and civil society in addressing the socio-economic inequities and vulnerabilities generated or reinforced by capitalism. In this context it is significant that Salamon and Anheier prefer to describe this realm of economic activity as the `non-profit sector' or the `Third sector' rather than civil society, terms which serve to depoliticise debate around the relative roles of state, market and civil society in dealing with social and economic inequalities and questions of the public good. Furthermore, it is disturbing that donors are often using these terms interchangably, a tendency which is likely to further reinforce the depoliticisation of any discussion around the consensus model of market, state and civil society.

Fourth, we suggest that market economies can undermine the cohesive and integrating dimensions of civil society, creating and reinforcing processes of social exclusion. In tracing the conceptual separation of civil society from the economy we can also observe undercurrents of tension and ambivalence around the atomising impact of the market upon civil society and the concomitant integrating effects of civil society upon the market. The idea that civil society complements and indeed facilitates capitalist development is premised upon a liberal conceptualisation of the economic actor as an utility-maximising, autonomous and rational individual. Such economic individualism finds echoes in the political sphere where liberal theorists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries envisioned democracy as an elitist affair, limited to property-owning (male) citizens. This notion of civil society as the associative realm of propertied

individuals consolidates the economic individualism underpinning capitalist development and in this sense can be said to facilitate capitalist processes.

However in its sharp attack upon the state, the contemporary civil society debate ended up not only eulogising civil society but also diluting the critical content of civil society. Yet if we look back to Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment writers, whose work has informed the different conceptualisations of civil society-economy relations, we find a constant thematisation of the creative yet destabilising impulses of market forces and their shaping of civil society. On the one hand the market seems to provide the material and social basis for the autonomy of civil society against the state; on the other hand it seems to undermine the solidary bonds of association, restricting the autonomy and diversity of civil society. Whilst in contemporary debate the state is posited as the main threat to civil society and the primary source of political despotism, Enlightenment critics such as Ferguson were alert to the dangers posed by the market to public life.

Whilst the works of Ferguson, Hegel, Marx and other eighteenth and nineteenth century writers point to the de facto exclusionary character of civil society, which nevertheless gave the appearance in its discourse of liberal freedoms and rights as a domain of inclusion and equality, in contemporary thinking the social character of civil society has received little critical comment. The anti-state theme which dominated civil society debate in the 1980s and much of the 1990s has consolidated a depiction of civil society as an unified, benign, harmonious plurality of a people struggling for negative liberties from an oppressive state, be it socialist, authoritarian, dictatorial or military. It is easy to be swept away by the appearance of plurality and diversity and miss the politics of civil society. In their very useful attempts to measure the state of the non-profit sector, Salamon and Anheier (1999, 1998, 1994), too, fall prey to the lure of diversity and plurality. In measuring the non-profit sector they juxtapose a range of organisations from soup kitchens to private hospitals. In doing so they contribute to the veiling of social and economic inequalities which such organisations express.

By the mid-1990s as donors gained more experience in attempting to `build civil society' and observed how the emergent civil societies in newly independent East European states failed to consolidate themselves, often taking on disturbing anti-democratic characteristics, there was a growing awareness of the divisions within civil society and of the unequal power relations prevailing not just in the economy but also in civil society. The realisation that there are `barriers to entry' into civil society and that civil society is as much a captured field as the state and economy underpins the growing interest amongst donors, politicians and policy-makers in the idea of `social exclusion'. In the context of unequal economic and social power is it possible to have parity of association and participation in civil or political society? How can `the poor' and those on the margins of society find a voice in civil society? How can they finance associations and campaigns when the resources of corporate capital and privileged social groups are so much greater? Whose interests do donors promote in their civil-society strengthening programmes?

Strengthening civil society: challenges for donors

US donor agencies are the largest provider of civil society assistance, hence the way they conceive of civil society and seek to operationalise it has ramifications not only for other donors but also for those parts of local civil societies which become subject to

their efforts to operationalise civil society. It should be noted, however, that donor organisations vary in the purposes for which they use the concept of civil society and in their enthusiasm for civil society. Also, within agencies there can be divisions amongst staff about the desirability of civil society, the expectations about what it can achieve, and the most appropriate and effective ways to work with civil society organisations.

Given that US donor interest in civil society has as its prime objective democratisation, then aid support to civil society is biassed towards those groups which similarly promote this goal. Civil society assistance is thus partial, limited to supporting a discrete set of local organisations assumed to share similar values and purposes. Civil society assistance, however, is not limited to fostering democratisation. It also accords neatly with a broader agenda of promoting neo-liberal economic policies. Partnerships between local governments, business and community groups, dialogues and consultations around macro-economic policies, adjustment and poverty reduction, and support to neo-liberal economic think-tanks and policy institutes all serve to forge a consensus around economic strategies of privatisation and liberalisation.

How then do donors seek to strengthen civil society and what challenges does this pose? Donor efforts to strengthen civil society take a number of forms. These include the establishment of specific programmes to strengthen civil society, often within broader programmes around democracy and governance; specific projects to build the institutional capacity of civil society organisations; setting up partnerships between civil society organisations, business and government; promoting the financial sustainability of civil society organisations through support to local foundations and philanthropic institutions. These attempts to operationalise the concept of civil society are innovative and imaginative, promising to open up new avenues of participation for otherwise marginalised voices. They also seek to resist an essentialist, conflictual approach towards relations amongst market, state and civil society, suggesting imaginations of cooperative rather than antagonistic forms of mutual engagement. To a certain extent they also implicitly recognise the multi-dimensionality of individuals, the plurality of their identities, the co-existence of contradictory motives and interests. Thus business people may on the one hand strive for profits but also have a social conscience which can be nurtured for the `public good'. However they also bring to the surface the dilemmas and contradictions which donors face in attempting to construct civil society from the outside. Here we focus on three particular challenges: politics of plurality and choice, politics of universality, and politics of autonomy and dependence.

Politics of plurality and choice

Some scholars have shunned the use of civil society, pointing to its conceptual fuzziness, ideological impregnation and referential ambiguity. Overloaded with meanings and utilised for different purposes the concept of civil society is deemed too blunted to serve usefully as a sharp tool of analysis or as a distinct unit of investigation. Like democracy civil society is sufficiently `feelgood' to be the desire of all. Yet without further definition it is like a stick of candyfloss, gentle in colour, sweet to the tongue but in body like air.

Whilst academics and theorists have often been, and indeed can afford to be less precise in their empirical rendering of civil society, donor agencies, faced with the task of developing, nurturing and strengthening `civil society' have been forced to attempt some delineation of the concept. Without some notion of what constitutes civil society,

it becomes impossible to support this otherwise amorphous sphere. Public documents, programme reports and discussions with donor representatives reveal points of convergence and divergence amongst donors as to how they conceive empirically of civil society.

For all donors civil society is defined predominantly in sociological fashion as a sphere of intermediary organisation, which unlike the market is `not-for-profit' and unlike the state is `non-authoritative'. By adopting the discourse of civil society donors have been forced to think in broader terms than the traditional developmental non-governmental organisation. Whilst many donors recognise that civil society embraces a range of associational forms in a variety of domains such as youth clubs, human rights organisations, football clubs, learned societies, because of the nature of their activities and their ideological perspectives, they operate in practice with a narrower slice of the civil society cake. For some this has meant a continuation of former practice, working with grassroots organisations and developmental NGOs, whilst for others it has enabled them to extend their activities to include other organisations such as trade unions, human rights organisations, businesses and advocacy groups. While donor agencies may differ in the breadth of organisations they strive to operate with, they all tend to define civil society in terms of long or short lists of organisations that have the effect of depoliticising, sanitising and technicising the arena of association. Underscoring such a list approach is an equation of civil society with plurality per se, indeed contrasted with the assumed monolithism of the state. Yet lists tend to disguise the differential relations of power amongst civil society organisations, the diversity of voices and interests. Organisations are juxtaposed as though they operate upon an even playing-field, share similar values, seek common ideals. The World Bank marking of civil society as the site of `voice' and `participation' masks the political undercurrents and tensions amongst different organisations. Do we assume that the voice of anti-semitic groups is as morally desirable as the voice of democratic bodies? Do we assume that these voices are given equal weight? Are donor agencies neutral to the diverse groups within civil society? This is not to say that donor agencies are not aware of potential conflict within civil society. Indeed in the World Bank Development Report 1997 (:114-116), the Bank refers to the disparate interests and the differential distribution of power within civil society as well as the limitations of such organisations (1997: 114-116). Yet such tensions tend to be glossed over, footnoted or referred to in clauses rather than given the attention they are due.

The definitions of civil society that donors deploy contribute only partly to the process of selecting organisations to work with. Such choices are made according to a combination of factors such as the particular programme priorities of donor agencies, the philosophy and values guiding donors, donor perceptions of local groups with regard to their values, capacity, effectiveness and influence. Yet not all donors make transparent the criteria they adopt to select organisations. Some, indeed, have no clear strategy for selecting between organisations, relying on the personal `feel-good’ factor. This approach reflects a view of civil society as benign, as the `good guy' in the triadic unity, a view which as discussed earlier emerges out of the anti-state agenda of many civil society enthusiasts. It underplays the conflict within civil society and the darker side of civil society. Some organisations, such as USAID and UNDP, have developed frameworks for guiding their work with civil society.

All donor agencies are part of a politics of civil society and development, though USAID is one of the few agencies which has gone furthest in clarifying its purposes and criteria. The failure of other agencies to operate with such clarity not only has an impact upon the effectiveness of their programmes but also makes it considerably harder for local organisations to understand the nature and goals of donor agencies. By using the limited criteria of `non-profit, non-governmental' as the first step in selecting organisations, the values and visions that organisations represent are swept away. The politics of choice is removed from view. Yet whilst the public documents of donor institutions and the rhetoric of partnership appear to celebrate the plurality of civil society, actual practice as reflected in funding, projects and programmes suggest that processes of selection have occurred which are not accidental. For example, for international financial institutions and some bi-lateral donors, business associations are more welcome as partners than their trade unions counterparts. Thus the neutral appearance of civil society discourse tends to mask political agendas and render ideological hegemonies and values almost invisible.

Politics of universality

Not only is there a tendency to assume that civil society within nation-states is homogenous in moral purpose and values, but also that there is but one civil society in the world. The triadic representation, and the consensus interpretation of this in mainstream development thinking, acquires blue-print status, even though some donors such as USAID have paid heed to relativist arguments and stressed the need for localised approaches and strategies. Yet civil society is generally understood as both a universal norm and a universal fact. Moreover, with US domination of civil society assistance, this universal norm and universal fact is elided with an American vision of civil society with its roots in Tocquevillian ideas of self-association. The dream and the reality become confused so that donor agencies end up projecting their vision as an established and natural truth upon other societies. As Gellner (1994:34) remarked when commenting on the authoritarian outcomes of the 1789 French Revolution, "Human society does not, it would seem, lend itself to the simple application of blueprints worked out in advance by pure thought".

Within this vision donors also take for granted that particular kinds of organisations constitute civil society. Formal organisations such as business associations, development NGOs, churches, clubs and so on are considered part of civil society but informal associations based on kinship belong to `the traditional', `the backward'. For donors the prime organisation of interest is the NGO. `NGOs' are viewed as a key, and indeed `natural', component of any civil society so that where they are absent, they should be created. Many civil society strengthening programmes set out to do just that, particularly in transitional societies where civil society was sharply constricted. Organisations created from the outside often lack a distinct social constituency of support and therefore any social or political meaning for local communities. Creating NGOs from the outside also does not ensure that these will have a democratic content or aspire to being vehicles of social and political change or even gain legitimacy in local contexts.

More seriously such preconceptions can hinder understanding of the complexity of social forces which underpin processes of social and political transformation and the relative significance of different types of organisation in mobilising political support. For Hann (1996: 22-24), such universalist conceptions hinder inquiry into the *multiplicity* of

civil societies, the diverse ways in which societies address problems of accountability, trust and cooperation, not all of which will be expressed through the institutional forms of NGOs. In his critique of US democracy aid, Carothers (1999: 248-249) points to the failure of donor agencies to appreciate the complexities of social and political life in different contexts and to ignore socially and politically significant organisations which do not neatly correspond to mainstream American understanding of civil society actors:

> "American democracy promotors have made few efforts to understand civil society on its own terms in complex traditional societies in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. They basically ignore the many layers of clans, tribes, castes, village associations, peasant groups, local religious organizations, ethnic associations, and the like as essentially unfathomable complexities that do not directly bear on democratic advocacy work. Democracy promotors pass through these countries on hurried civil society assessment missions and declare that "very little civil society exists" because they have found only a handful of Westernized NGOs devoted to nonpartisan public-interest advocacy work on the national scale".

To imagine that building civil society can be a project which is achievable within a five year time-frame defies historical experience.

Politics of autonomy and dependence

The historical weakness of the domestic bourgeoisie in many Sub-Saharan African countries as well as the relatively low levels of per capita income have contributed to the weak financial base of civil society and the concomitant influence of donors in creating and fashioning local organisations. In Mozambique and Bangladesh, two of the poorest countries in the world, local NGOs and government are heavily dependent on external funding for their programmes and activities. Similarly in the transitional contexts of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, where domestic capital is weak and liberal democratic organisations fragile, donors have played a key role in shaping civil society. The flourishing of women's groups in post-Mao China is related partly to the support donors provided in the run-up to the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (Howell, 1997).

Given that it is rare for donors to withdraw completely, such civil societies are critically constructed from the outside rather than from within. In contexts of aid dependence the manufacturing of, and the long-term sustainability of, civil society become significant issues. External dependence on donors can easily lead to a distortion of local agendas as local NGOs competing for funding shape their planned programmes and activities around the priority of donors. In countries where civil society and democratic institutions are fragile, the arrival of donors with preconceived notions about what civil society should do and what it should like can end up weakening the capacity of local organisations to develop their own visions of civil society, their own understandings of how to achieve social and political change and their own solutions to problems that are central to their lives. In some contexts the national state and donors compete to shape civil society in their image, reinforcing the conceptualisation of civil society as anti-state and also underlining the politics of donor interventions

Thus, in operationalising the idea of civil society donors encounter certain dilemmas and contradictions which call for a re-thinking of strategy and purpose. Donor intervention in civil society creates its own politics - a battle field of contending norms, values and visions of how social, economic and political life should be organised and the respective roles of the individual, collective and state therein. There is a politics of choice which leads to insiders and outsiders, the included and the excluded. There is a politics of partnership which reinforces particular visions and norms and underplays the conflictual elements of relations within civil society and between civil society, state and market actors. Civil society does not lend itself to external manufacturing. It cannot be created via blue-prints from offices in Washington or London. Civil societies in any context have a history and must develop in tune with their particular historical, cultural and political rhythms. Underlying the politics of universality, partnership and choice are differential power relations, whereby donor agencies, with their financial, human and knowledge resources, inevitably dominate interactions with fund recipients. This in turn raises the paradox that civil society organisations, which are supposed to be marked by the feature of `independence', end up sacrificing this autonomy to various degrees through their reliance upon donor funding. This becomes reflected in competition amongst local NGOs for funding at the expense of seeking common strategies and alliances, the reification of `the project' and `the NGO' rather than a concerted strategy to overcome commonly identified problems and the adoption of donor priorities in an effort to sustain activity and ultimately the existence of the organisation. Without careful and sensitive prior analysis of needs and the social and political context, donor intervention into local civil societies can end up distorting and weakening local processes of association and problem resolution.

Conclusion

Through this critical interrogation of civil society we draw attention to some of the assumptions that are made by scholars and donors about the relationship between civil society, democracy and the market. In outlining the two, somewhat caricaturised, approaches towards civil society, namely, the mainstream and alternative approaches, we seek to emphasise that there is a politics of civil society and that this politics in turn impinges upon attempts to operationalise the concept. We do not concur with those sceptics who view the concept of civil society as too diffuse and obscure to be of any practical or intellectual use. We suggest that the idea of civil society is being appropriated by those who are concerned with issues of inequality, poverty and democratic inclusion and that it has an immediacy and resonance in many contexts.

However, we do think it is important that donor agencies, be they multilateral, bilateral, state or non-state, make transparent their understanding of what constitutes civil society and their assumptions about the relations among civil society, democratisation and economic development. Donors need to recognise that there is a politics of civil society, that civil society is neither a neutral discourse nor a neutral set of agencies. Donors therefore need to recognise their own role as actors in the drama of civil society. They need to understand and be open about the historical preface to their civil society agendas and the factors conditioning their support for certain selected organisations within civil society. This in turn implies distinguishing between normative and empirical conceptualisations of civil society – that is, recognising civil society as it actually is, rather than as how it should be. This means

moving beyond blueprints for realising normative visions of civil society towards contextualised social and political analyses that can better inform donor interventions. This in turn will require deconstructing the fetishised notion of the NGO as the prime organisational vehicle for and manifestation of civil society, and recognising that any organisation is constituted by particular social and historical relations.

There also needs to be more thinking aloud about civil society, inequality and poverty. We need to shift the debate on from a unilateral focus on `civil society versus the state'. We need to explore more closely and critically the links between civil society and capitalism, between civil society and inequality and between civil society and poverty reduction. This in turn may well require looking again at the role of the state in development. Civil society potentially offers a way of thinking anew about the developmental state. The concept pushes us to ask how engaged, active and strong publics could not just defend citizens from the state, but also participate in thinking and debating the common good for a society and how a democratic state could play a role in this process.

In the light of the complex challenges donors face in supporting civil society, there are also questions around which donors could do what best? Should all donors seek to support or work with civil society in the same ways and to the same degree? Some Northern NGOs have relatively long and consistent histories of cooperating with local groups espousing similar values and goals. Such cooperation predates the arrival of explicit civil society support programmes and indeed such NGOs themselves do not have such explicit programmes. Are they best suited to support and work with local civil society groups in the South? Is it more appropriate for bilaterals and multilaterals to focus their efforts on promoting an enabling environment for civil society organisations? It is crucial that the intellectual and associational space for civil society is protected and fostered so that people can reflect openly and critically about the common good and can experiment with alternative ways of organising social, political and economic life.

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Notes

[i] This paper is based upon the key findings of our book *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Interrogation*, 2001.

[ii] See Ersson and Lane in Leftwich, (ed) 1996 for a review of this literature; Barsh (1992), Hadenius (1992); Lipset (1959); Diamond (1992).

[iii] The volume edited by Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, 1992, argues that capitalist development fosters the growth of civil society by bringing about increasing urbanisation, bringing workers together in factories, improving transport and communications and raising literacy levels. The stronger organisational capacity of workers and the middle classes empowers them to change the balance of class power, weakening the landed upper classes in particular. Their volume, which incorporates structural factors as well as agency, is much closer to the social democratic tradition of reforming and democratising capitalism, in which the groups of civil society, in particular those around class, play a political role in that process.

[iv] For a detailed exposition of the gradual conceptual distinction between civil society and the state from 1750 onwards in European political thought, see Keane (1988:35-72).