

## **Civil Society, Democracy, and Development**

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This paper focusses on the relationship between civil society and development. We attempt to clarify some theoretical and conceptual issues, and to summarize and assess the empirical literature. However, our conception of ‘development’ itself is considerably broader than the norm, so we need first to clarify what we mean by the term.

### **The Meaning of Development**

Freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means.’ (Sen, 1999, p. 10).

Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, offered an important insight when he pictured *development* as a process of increasing freedoms. Freedom from hunger. Freedom from disease. Freedom from illiteracy. Freedom from oppression of every type. These all are basic human needs, and they constitute the heart of our conception of development. As these needs begin to be met, development can take more complex forms, such as freedom to work, freedom to choose marriage partners, or freedom to practise any religion, or none at all, but all of these share the characteristic of increased freedom.

When development is conceived as an increase in freedoms, the traditional conception of *economic development* as a simple increase in GDP *per capita* which is common in the literature can, then, be better understood as a useful indicator of the existence of a resource that may or may not be actually employed so as to increase people’s freedoms. In this respect, it is similar to a measure of the amount of water available per person in a particular region. This may tell us something about the potential for development, but until we know how that resource is distributed and employed we know nothing about the reality of development.

When development is defined as increased freedoms, as it is here, the concept clearly is rooted in liberal political thought. Liberalism, however, comes in many varieties. Some liberals

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are primarily concerned about property rights and freedom from state control. Others are equally or more concerned about equality of opportunity, and see improvements in such areas as nutrition, health services and education as basic functions of the state. Finally, there is a social democratic variant of liberalism that sees gross inequalities as limiting the freedoms available to a large section of the public. Such inequalities are seen, from this perspective, as both unjust in principle, and negative in their practical effects.

We hold all of these values. Property rights are one of the fundamental requirements for freedom, as are rule of law more generally, and freedom of speech. Freedom requires a limited role for the state, and one that is at least partly balanced by a strong civil society. In our view, however, freedom also requires that every infant born into a society has a high probability of becoming an educated and economically self-sustaining adult, with a capacity to make fundamental choices about his or her life. This implies that the state must give a very high priority to the provision of basic health care, access to clean water, reasonable standards of nutrition, and education. Finally, because we believe gross inequalities to be both unjust and counterproductive, we maintain that the state ought to act so as to significantly reduce and limit the inequalities that arise from illiberal, stratified social, economic and political structures of the past, as well as those that develop under a more-or-less liberal state as a consequence of the very freedoms that it protects.

While there are well-known debates in the literature on whether democracy is desirable in less developed countries, most authors assume development to be beneficial. The late Claude Ake is one of the few scholars who has been critical of ‘development’, as it has conventionally been understood:

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Development strategies, reflecting both the scientific dogmatism of development experts and the isolation of African leaders, worked from the top down and were imbued with attitudes hostile to the poor majority. The common people were seen as a major obstacle to development: their expectations were too high, they consumed too much of their meager incomes, they lacked ambition and self-reliance, they were too lazy and too superstitious. In short, the common people were inherent enemies of progress, even their own progress. This became a justification for disregarding their interests and for brutalizing them in the name of development. As a result, most Africans tend to view the state and its development agents as hostile forces to be evaded, cheated, or thwarted as opportunities permit (Ake 1997, p. 67).

Not only did Ake see development of this kind as undesirable, he also viewed it as an anti-democratic force. The pursuit of top-down development has frequently required structural adjustment programmes. In Africa, at least, these often inflict such immense additional suffering on ordinary people that they can be imposed only through large-scale repression, thus helping to make African regimes even more authoritarian (Ake 1997, p. 73).

Our own view is that development, conceived of as increasing freedom in all aspects of life, clearly is desirable, and we suspect that Ake would have agreed, given that understanding of the term. This understanding of development incorporates movement towards democratization as a part of the concept. The relationship between economic development and political development seems to be reciprocal. There may be a threshold level of economic development, below which democratization is difficult and likely to be reversed, but democracy is not absolutely impossible, even in an extremely poor country. Above the threshold, pressures for

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democratization are likely to mount (Roll and Talbott 2003, p. 84). Whether and when they are successful depends on a number of factors, including how vehemently they are resisted by the existing ruling elites.

Although the evidence on the effects of democratization on subsequent economic growth are admittedly mixed, we believe that the balance of the evidence suggests that growth rates are higher on average in democratic states (Bhalla 1997, pp. 226-27; Przeworski and Limongi 1997, p. 167). Certainly, there can be no doubt that individual democratic states, such as Botswana and Mauritius, can achieve very high rates of economic growth on a sustained basis over the course of several decades. At the very minimum, then, democratic government does not preclude economic development. As Przeworski and Limongi (1997, 178) concluded, ‘There is no tradeoff between development and democracy: democracy need not generate slower growth. In turn, we know democracy is more likely to survive when the economy grows.’

Sen, who accepts the ‘no relationship’ conclusion, has pointed out that democracy is desirable in and of itself, and because of its consequences for public policy and the public good. His well-known observation that no famine has ever occurred in a democracy is a telling example (Sen 1999, pp. 152-53). His view is that the fact that democracy does not prevent development is all that is necessary in order to conclude that democratic government normally should be preferred over authoritarianism.

The prospects for both economic development and democratization may depend to a significant degree upon the degree of legitimacy accorded by a population to their political institutions and to their state. Englebert (2002) argues that the key cause of variations in growth rates in Africa is the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of the regime. He defines a state as legitimate

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'when its structures have evolved endogenously to its society and there is some level of historical continuity to its institutions' (Englebert 2002, p. 4). His measure of state legitimacy attempts to distinguish between states that have reasonably strong ties between their political institutions and their society, and those that do not (Englebert 2002, pp. 7, and 125-29). Legitimate states are more likely than others to practice good governance, and they have rates of economic growth that are approximately two percent per year higher than those for non-legitimate states (Englebert 2002, pp. 139-42).

The existence of a strong and active civil society also can be an important factor in legitimizing the state, and we turn now to the relationship between development and civil society.

### **Civil Society and Development**

Among laws that rule human societies there is one which seems to be more precise and clear than all others. If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which equality of conditions is increased (Tocqueville, 1990 [1840], p. 110).

As the quotation from Tocqueville suggests, the civil society concept has a lengthy intellectual history (Cohen and Arato, 1992). However, its utility in development studies began to be recognized only during the 1980s when the concept was rediscovered by social scientists studying Latin America and Eastern Europe (Hagopian, 2000, p. 897). It has since been applied in studies of development throughout the world. The strength of civil society is thought to be important in several ways, including encouraging greater civility in public life, increasing the accountability of governments to their peoples, and as a force for democratization.

## I. Defining Civil Society

There is general agreement in the literature that civil society is an area of social life bounded on one side by the state and on the other by families and kinship networks (Kasfir, 1998a, p. 4). However, that consensus yields quickly to ambiguities, differences of emphasis, and areas of disagreement.

Scholars who write about civil society differ immensely about what they wish to include within the concept, and what they wish to exclude. As Fierlbeck (1998) has demonstrated, some authors emphasize associational life, and others formal organizations. Some authors wish to exclude organizations that participate in the economy or the market, while others would include at least some such bodies. No author appears to have developed a usable operational definition of civil society, and it seems unlikely that any operational definition can be developed that would incorporate more than a very narrow sub-set of the activities generally considered to be part of civil society.

To outline just one of the many problems that Fierlbeck (1998, p. 155) analyzed, the almost universal distinction that is made between civil society and the state is difficult, perhaps impossible, to operationalize. Are self-regulating professional associations part of the state or civil society? Are publically-funded universities parts of the state apparatus? Are they part of the state apparatus if they receive significant funding from the state, but more of their revenue comes from other sources? Are state employees who participate during evenings or weekends in human rights organizations, women's groups, or environmental NGOs, part of the state, or part of civil society?

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In fact, it appears that any sensible and potentially operational definition of the distinction between state and civil society would need to focus not on groups or individuals, but on activities. A person who is a state employee may function as a member of civil society in some of his or her activities (Hutchful, 1995, p. 71). An individual who is employed by a non-profit, public interest NGO may function as part of the state apparatus if the NGO has signed a contract to implement certain government policies or programmes. An organization may similarly function as an organ of civil society in some of its activities, and as an agent of the state in others. Indeed, there may be situations in which a single set of organizational activities would best be seen as constituting parts of *both* civil society and the state. If, for instance, a women's organization is contracted by the state to help to educate rural women about elections and their right to vote, we would seem to have a situation in which the goals of both civil society and the state are being advanced simultaneously.

Fierlbeck (1998, p. 172) concluded that, ‘the concept of “civil society” is overused, overrated, and analytically insubstantial.’ So, should we abandon it altogether? We think not. Despite its shortcomings as an operational concept, it remains useful as a sort of *meta*-concept, or what Abraham Kaplan (1964, pp. 55-56) has termed a ‘construct’. That is, civil society is a concept that cannot itself be observed, directly or indirectly, in its entirety. In this respect, it is like many key concepts in the social sciences, including the ‘state’, ‘democracy’, ‘power’ and, as we have suggested, ‘development’. As is true of these and many other constructs, they can guide our research at a theoretical level, but when we wish to turn to empirical research, we need to develop operational definitions for narrower parts or sub-sets of the construct itself.

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While we believe that civil society remains a useful social science concept at this level, it is important for us to be aware of the fact that it is not a value neutral idea. Civil society is positively valued by virtually every scholar who writes about it, and by all of the civic activists who feel themselves to be participants in it. While Tocqueville was aware that civil society could be as tyrannical as any state, that insight is largely absent from the contemporary literature of comparative politics (Fierlbeck, 1998:149-165). Nor does the literature on civil society and development pay sufficient attention to the fact that participants in civil society in poorer countries tend to come from the middle and upper-middle classes, which creates at least a potential for the influence of civil society on public policy to contribute to an increase in inequalities among different social strata (Clarke, 1998, pp. 50-52).

Feirlback (1998, p. 159) also has noted that the idea of civil society is firmly rooted in liberal political thought. By emphasizing the supposed benefits of civil society, international institutions like the World Bank, and western donor governments, have been able to use widespread popular enthusiasm for strengthening civil society as a means of encouraging such fundamentally liberal values as the accountability of the state to the public, due process, and transparency in public life, without calling this ‘liberalism’. They also have been able to associate contested elements of liberalism or neoliberalism, such as a preference for a small state sector, with the development of civil society (Fierlbeck, 1998, pp. 170-171). In the short run, it is much easier to gain public acceptance for contracting out state activities if they are, or may be, contracted to organs of civil society, than it is when they are contracted to private corporations. However, Pearce (2000, pp. 19-21) notes that NGOs that cooperate in implementing neoliberal policies frequently lose legitimacy with their public.

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Given the liberal intellectual roots of the civil society concept, Fierlbeck (1998, p. 159) asks, ‘to what extent can it—or ought it—to be applied to manifestly non-liberal states?’ We think that the concept can be usefully applied in non-liberal states because both liberal values and civil society itself come in varying degrees. Both may be virtually nonexistent, or both may exist to some limited degree. Changes in the strength of civil society, and in the liberal values associated with it, can be interesting and important, even in states that are fundamentally non-liberal. The growing literature on civil society in Arab or Islamic states is evidence of the utility of the concept in nonliberal settings (Kubba, 2000; Mardin, 1995; Norton, 1993). Indeed, the very contradictions between an older and still dominant set of non-liberal values and those associated with civil society can be central to a valid understanding of many societies. For example, Hall (1995, p. 25) has pointed out that, ‘[a]dherence to the ideal of civil society in modern India, amongst popular sectors as well as within the elite, is very remarkable; but this exists within the social context of caste, which still cages huge numbers with awful efficiency.’

Three important points do follow from the recognition of the ideological biases that are inherent in the civil society concept. One is that those of us who study civil society and development ought to explicitly acknowledge the ideological baggage that accompanies the concept. Second, we need to develop standards for determining whether a particular organization truly is ‘civil’ in its activities. If we blindly accept that any and every nongovernmental organization is a part of civil society, we may find that we are including groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and Al Qaeda. Finally, when we analyze the views of civil society offered by other writers and institutions, we need to ask what values they build into their understanding of the concept.

## II. Two Approaches to Civil Society

Two different emphases can be detected in various authors' conceptions of civil society.

One conception focuses on its associational character. This approach, found in the works of such writers as Jürgen Habermas (1987, pp. 119-152) and Robert Putnam (1994, 1995), sees the web of associations among individuals as the key characteristic of civil society. It is this web of associations that builds tolerance of diversity and a shared sense of a public sphere of life.

Several proponents of this approach would include all types of associations, whether formal or informal, and whether political or apolitical. Others see the organizational aspect of civil society as consisting at most of spontaneous, unstructured social formations (Isaac, 1993; Lin, 2001, pp. 19-28). This emphasis on the associational character of civil society is found most frequently in theoretical analyses of the concept, and occasionally in empirical research in developed countries. It is less common, but not unknown, in empirical studies of less developed countries. Widner and Mundt (2000) provide one example of this general approach to civil society in research on developing countries. Using survey research data from selected districts in Botswana and Uganda, they explore the relationships among such factors as citizen's number of memberships in associations, frequency of attendance, voluntarism, frequency of conversations with people of different ethnic or religious backgrounds, and social trust.

The second emphasis is on formal organizations, especially nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), that take positions on issues of public policy. This is the most frequent approach in studies of civil society in developing countries. Researchers count the number and type of civil society organizations in a country (Holm *et al.*, 1996). They sometimes estimate the number of active members of such groups (Seligson, 1999). In some studies state officials and

group leaders are interviewed about their activities, and perceived successes and failures (Carroll and Carroll, 1999).

There are, however, at least two important conceptual differences among authors who focus on the organizational make-up of civil society. One such issue is the role of ethnic or tribal organizations in civil society. The second question is whether the business community can properly be considered to be a part of civil society.

### **III. Organizations Rooted in an Ethnic or Tribal Community**

For most scholars, civil society consists of all politically active voluntary organizations that are broader in scope than the family and narrower than the state, and that base membership on universalistic criteria (Kasfir, 1998a, p. 4). Because civil society is supposed to help to overcome social divisions based on ethnic, tribal or religious identities, organizations rooted in specific identity groups are explicitly excluded from civil society. They are the 'old' associations that should gradually give way to 'new' formal organizations based upon shared interests rather than on ascribed characteristics (Kasfir, 1998b, pp. 136-8). This conventional wisdom holds that a group life that is based on ethnic, religious or tribal identities undermines democratic processes and institutions by turning politics into a battle to maximize the interests of each group, no matter what the consequences for others (Holm and Molutsi, 1992, pp. 87-9; Hyden, 1992, pp. 10-12; Fierlbeck, 1998, pp. 190-200).

A well-developed civil society provides the foundation for stable and effective democratic politics, on the other hand, and according to this view, such a civil society consists of strong and autonomous secondary organizations based upon universalistic membership criteria (Shils, 1991; Hall 1995, pp. 15-17; Leftwich, 1997, p. 531; Mohamedou, 1998, pp. 74-6). As

Saxton (1997, p. 16) has pointed out, many of the authors who insist on universalistic membership criteria for the organs of civil society would consider a civil society that incorporates ethnically-based organizations to be a civil society that is ‘stunted’ or ‘incomplete’.

Kasfir (1998a; 1998b) has objected to the exclusion of ethnic groups from civil society on several grounds. One is that, by insisting upon formal organizations rather than the often informal associations associated with tribal identities in Africa, we would exclude the poor. Because the poor are disadvantaged at forming formal organizations, and because those organizations that are established have less access to state elites than those based within the modern middle class, ‘it is a relatively safe assumption that if civil society is defined as the activities of formal organizations, it will reflect the interests and ideas of elites or dominant classes’ (Kasfir, 1998a, p. 5). A second objection is that, in societies in which ethnic identities are strong and politicized, ‘[i]f ethnic demands are excluded from civil society, it will be difficult to expect civil society organizations to represent anything close to the full agenda of citizens’ demands’ (Kasfir, 1998a, p. 7). He points out that it is difficult to argue that the ends of democracy are furthered by excluding from democratic processes the issues and organizations that are most salient for the majority of the population (Kasfir 1998b, pp. 136-8).

A number of studies of civil society in an African context have similarly concluded that groups based in particular ethnic, tribal or religious communities need to be included. Karlström (1999, p. 111) argues that ‘traditional, ethnically-based political organizations provide at least the potential for a positive articulation between state and society,’ and that they therefore should be included. According to Olowu (2002, p. 64), in many parts of Africa, religious institutions are the best developed civil society organizations. Comaroff and Comaroff (1999, p. 20) suggest

that, rather than simply transposing a model of civil society derived from European experience on African societies, we need to ‘identify what African hybrids, Africanized modes of civil society, might actually look like. Or how they might resonate with ideals of society and accountability that differ from those found in the West.’ After reviewing the arguments for and against including ethnically-based groups within civil society in an African context, Osaghae (1997, p. 19) concluded, ‘[t]heir inclusion is perhaps the distinctive mark of civil society in Africa.’

In fact, some societies in which ethnic identities are powerful do display a group life that appears indistinguishable from that of conventional civil societies, except that many of the component organs are groups based within particular ethnic, religious, linguistic or tribal communities. In at least a few such cases, this type of *ethnicized* civil society also seems to provide precisely the type of support for democratic institutions and processes that is associated with the conventional version. Mauritius may be the clearest example of a state with ‘a vibrant civil society’ (Srebrnik, 2000, p. 17), in which the majority of the component organizations have their roots in one of the country’s ethnic communities, and in which some of these organizations are tied specifically to the interests of members of a particular ethnic group (Carroll and Carroll, 1999; Carroll and Carroll, 2000).

We should also note that the distinction between groups based on ascriptive or universalistic criteria is not always clear. In many cases formal organizations exist to pursue non-ethnic goals such as human rights, aspects of social welfare, or workers rights, with no restrictions on the ethnic identities of members, but draw their membership largely or entirely

from a particular ethnic community for such reasons as geographical segregation, or the ethnic composition of the personal networks of group founders or leaders.

For these reasons, we believe that studies of civil society and development will be richer and more fully informed if they include groups whose members come largely or entirely from a single ethic or tribal community as potential components of civil society in conceptual terms, and as actual members if, and to the extent that, they attempt to influence questions of public policy in a peaceful and relatively civil manner.

#### **IV. Business Organizations**

The second theoretical dispute is between those who would exclude all business organizations and those who would include them. The perspective offered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2001, p. 1) is quite typical: ‘civil society constitutes a third sector, existing alongside and interacting with the state and profit-seeking firms.’ Swift (1999, pp. 4-5, emphasis in the original) defines civil society as ‘the **activity of citizens in free association who lack the authority of the state . . . Such activities are motivated by objectives other than profit-making . . .**’ Stanton (1999, p. 243) has noted that most definitions of civil society exclude business firms, but that there is disagreement about whether organizations like chambers of commerce or unions should be included. Van Rooy (2002, p. 490) similarly observes that most conceptions of civil society do not include ‘groups belonging to the market place’. Cox (1999, p. 10) claims that the ‘current widely understood usage’ of the term ‘civil society’ is one that places it in opposition to the power of both the state and corporations. This position also is commonly held among writers who are associated with the non-profit NGO sector.

Kasfir (1998a: 16) suggests, on the other hand, that the reason that African civil societies are weak is because the ‘business sector is often expected to play a leading role in civil society [but] the business sector in Africa cannot play this role, because it is too weak and too politically acquiescent.’ Lawson (1999) similarly attributes the frequent failure of democracy in Africa in part to the weakness of the private sector and its resulting inability to play a central role in civil society. In the case of such African countries as Botswana, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, however, this question is of considerable significance because there is now an independent private sector of reasonable size that does attempt to act collectively to influence government policy. For example, the successful public protest against the sudden imposition of a 17.5 per cent value-added tax in Ghana in 1995 was led by such organizations as the Association of Ghana Industries, the Chamber of Commerce, the Employers Association, and the Trades Union Congress (Ayee, 2002, pp. 188-189). In other regions, such as Latin America and much of Asia, the private sector often is very significant in size and influence, and it interacts regularly with the state.

The debate about the inclusion or exclusion of the private sector seems to revolve around the issue of actors’ motivations or intentions. Those who would exclude the private sector do so because private sector organizations are motivated by the desire for profit, and their intention in participating in civil society is to further that private and selfish goal. In this view, only groups motivated by a concern for the public good should be considered to be organs of civil society.

In fact, of course, motives are usually mixed. Business people also may be residents of a particular town, parents of young children, sports fans, and so on. In trying to influence governments, their positions may be influenced by several of their roles, in addition to their

profit-seeking role as members of the business sector. And leaders of non-profit NGOs often are concerned about their own careers and incomes and families, as well as pursuing the stated goals of their organizations.

If we focus on the potential effects of organizations on the emergence and endurance of democracy, rather than on their leaders' motives and intentions, treating for-profit organizations (and unions) as components of civil society seems logical. A strong civil society contributes to democracy in at least five ways. First, it embodies the value of civility, permitting political debate and disagreement without resorting to coercion or violence. Second, it provides a zone of at least partial autonomy from the state within which individuals and groups can pursue personal and collective interests. Third, it helps to make the state accountable to the people. Fourth, it provides a forum for input into policy issues by the public. And finally, it adds to the policy implementation capacity of the state. Together, these contributions help to make the state-society relationship more balanced and reciprocal, rather than being unidirectionally top-down (Hyden, 1992).

Business organizations can contribute to each of these outcomes. As Barrington Moore, Jr. (1966) has argued, it was the emergence of an industrial bourgeoisie in Britain, France and the United States that set those countries on the path toward liberal democracy. Private sector organizations will be interested in the profitability of their members, but they nonetheless can pursue their goals with civility; they can help to foster a degree of autonomy from the state; they can help to make the state accountable for its actions; they can add to the diversity of voices in the policy process; and they can assist the state in the implementation of some of its policies.

In summary, then, the conception of civil society that we find most useful includes all voluntary associations that attempt, at least periodically, to influence public life, without trying to take direct control of the state. These include both business organizations and groups that draw their members from a particular ethnic or tribal community, as well as not-for-profit NGOs with memberships based entirely on universalistic criteria.

#### **V. The Relationship Between Civil Society and Development**

Earlier we defined our understanding of the meaning of development. For our purposes, here, it is sufficient to note that development includes at least three sectors of society: the economy, of course; the political system itself; but also the society in senses ranging from health and education to the role of women to interpersonal and inter-community relations.

We can note a number of characteristics of the relationships among civil society, political development, economic development and social development. First, the relationship between civil society and each aspect of development is *reciprocal*. The strength and composition of civil society have consequences for each aspect of development, and changes in each aspect of development are likely to have consequences for the strength and composition of civil society.

Second, the nature of these relationships is *contingent* upon the circumstances of each country. The enthusiasm for civil society in recent years has been so great that the literature on civil society deals almost exclusively with its positive consequences, especially in the realm of political development. The evidence for these positive links is largely logical. What empirical evidence is provided often is impressionistic rather than systematic. Nevertheless, a plausible logical connection has been drawn between the strength of civil society and the character of state-society relations. A strong civil society provides support for the rule of law and observance

of human rights. It helps to make the government accountable to the public. It educates the public and state actors about issues. It can provide expertise to complement or challenge that of the state. While civil society organizations sometimes can be surprisingly active and effective under authoritarian regimes, (Otobo, 2002, p. 160), a strong civil society ultimately is a force for democratization, and a powerful supporting institution for democratic institutions when they come into existence (Morales *et al.*, 1999). A stronger civil society also increases the capacity of the state to develop and implement policies, and thereby can contribute to economic and social development (Carroll and Carroll, 1999).

All of these propositions seem likely to be true with some frequency. However, we should not neglect much more negative possibilities. No actual civil society is likely to incorporate and represent all social groups equally (Sandbrook, 1993, p. 4; White, 1994, pp. 385-386). Given inequality in the composition of civil society, and in the influence of different component organizations, civil society may sometimes provide support for maintaining or increasing inequalities, and for political domination by one social sector over others (Buchman, 1996, p. 96). Even if we exclude groups that pursue their goals by uncivil means from our understanding of civil society, South Africa under *apartheid* may have had the strongest civil society in sub-Saharan Africa. Some parts of that civil society struggled heroically to overcome *apartheid*, but, on balance, the net effect of South Africa's unrepresentative civil society in that era probably was to reinforce *apartheid*, and to resist democratization.

A third characteristic of these relationships between civil society and economic, political and social development is that they are likely to be *contributory* or probabilistic rather than

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necessary or sufficient. Newton (2001, pp. 211-212) seems to expect something very close to a necessary relationship between civil society and democracy:

It is difficult to imagine good government without a solid foundation of effective institutions, both public and private, for it is virtually impossible to create good government out of the poorly developed civil societies of banana republics. . . . Poorly developed civil societies are unlikely to sustain developed democracies.

Lawson (1999) also doubts that democracy can be established in a country with a weak civil society. However, Botswana stands as a counter example, having remained democratic for almost four decades since independence despite having a very weak civil society for much of that time (Molutsi and Holm, 1990; Holm *et al.*, 1996).

In many circumstances, then, a strengthening of civil society may make a positive contribution to political, economic and social development, but we should be alert to exceptions to this pattern. It also is true that, in states that manage to achieve unusual degrees of political, economic and social development in the absence of a strong civil society, we are likely to find that development in those areas contributes positively to the strengthening of civil society. Again, however, there are likely to be exceptions. If, for example, development occurs under an authoritarian regime, as in Cuba after the revolution, relative success in improving upon the previous circumstances in the realms of politics, economics and social services may make little contribution to the development of civil society.

### **Conclusion: Civil Society, Democracy, and Development**

In the previous section , we cautioned that the effects of civil society may not always be in the direction of greater equality, more accountability, or a more democratic system.

Nevertheless, it is clear that most frequently the net consequences of the influence and activities of civil society are, in fact, in these widely desired directions. A stronger civil society generally will help to produce more effective development governance. That raises the question of how civil society can be strengthened. There are three general approaches that may be helpful.

One is to assist those organizations that do exist in a fledgling civil society in their own efforts to become stronger. International institutions play a very important role when they bring together representatives of civil society organizations in international conferences. In research by the authors on state–civil society relations in Botswana and Mauritius, for example, leaders of women’s organizations, and of trade unions, repeatedly reported that the experience and contacts they gained through such conferences had been vital to the subsequent development of their organizations (Carroll and Carroll, 1997). Donors often insist that recipient states channel some or all of their assistance through NGOs, and that can provide a base of funding that would otherwise not be available (Fisher, 1998, pp. 181-184). Civil society organizations in more developed countries can seek out partners in developing countries to whom they can provide expertise and assistance. Even when civil society is least developed, assistance can be provided to community-based organizations to work cooperatively to resolve some of the most pressing of local problems.

When foreign governments provide assistance to indigenous organizations, however, it is important to avoid the appearance of supporting enemies of the existing regime. Stanton (1999, pp. 247-248) reports that efforts by the US government to strengthen civil society in Cuba were tied explicitly to the goal of toppling the regime of Fidel Castro. During the late 1990s, this produced a crackdown on the quasi-independent organizations that then existed, effectively

narrowing the room available for political thought, discussion and activity. A related danger is that if domestic NGOs rely too heavily on foreign supporters, they may lose credibility with both the government and the people of their country (Nyerere, 1993, p. 21).

A second approach is for the international community to encourage the governments of developing countries to move toward the conditions under which civil society is best able to develop naturally. These include rule of law, respect for human rights, and regulations that facilitate the formation of organizations. Considerable progress has sometimes been possible under even authoritarian governments when they have committed themselves to international standards in areas such as these. When this occurs, domestic supporters of such goals are able to pursue their ends by urging the government to abide by its own declared principles, rather than being in direct opposition to its rule.

Finally, a complimentary approach to strengthening civil society is to try to convince governing elites in less developed countries of the advantages, *from their own perspective*, of an active and effective civil society. Even authoritarian governors who maintain some desire for real development and legitimacy may be convinced that civil society can add to their capacity for policy implementation. This can be through consultation and public participation in policy-development which expands legitimacy. It can also be through using civil society as one arm of public/private partnerships, which not only can enhance capacity, but also can provide a degree of accountability and, therefore, legitimacy. Public/private partnerships in which the private sector partners are exclusively within the ‘for profit’ sphere, and often are international corporations, are incapable of making similar contributions to the accountability and legitimacy of the state.

Almost all less developed countries lack the trained, experienced personnel required in order to implement their own policies. International institutions and donors may organize conferences on the possibilities of using civil society organizations to carry out some aspects of policy implementation, and they can fund pilot projects. As civil society itself begins to develop greater knowledge and expertise, and as the state gains experience in working cooperatively with civil society, authorities may begin to turn to civil society organizations for partnerships as well as for policy advice. Initially, this may be primarily in areas that do not involve core values or interests of the state elite, or they may include only those organs of civil society which are strongly associated with the state. But this is a starting point.

Where civil society is weak, its development may require a considerable period of time. However, even modest improvements in the size and activities of civil society can make a difference. Development may lead over time to the emergence of a stronger civil society. Civil society can play an important reciprocal role in the governance of development. This paper has attempted to demonstrate that its role is somewhat more complex and multifaceted than some of the recent literature suggests. Nevertheless, to the extent that domestic and international actors can encourage or assist the growth of civil society in less developed countries, the prospects for good, effective and accountable development governance will be increased.

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