

More Powerful Than Ever

## What's Next for Civil Society?

by Miklos Marschall

The 1990s could be called the decade of civil society. During this time, the world witnessed an unprecedented revolution in civic association. From Latin America to Eastern Europe and across the globe, millions of civil society organizations – voluntary, independent citizen associations, formal or informal, acting in the public sphere between the state and the household – now exist. Their sheer numbers are breathtaking, and their power and influence are even more impressive. Today, civil society organizations (CSOs) have earned a seat at the table with local and global decision-makers. This spectacular development heralds a new era of citizen action.

The key attribute of civil society groups is participation. These groups are a tool for people to breathe life into “democracy,” or rule by the people. However, the term “civil society” is difficult to pin down because, in a sense, it is us and, therefore, contains

all the variety of human society. From an economic point of view, we call CSOs “nonprofits.” The Johns Hopkins University Center for Civil Society Studies found that, even excluding religious congregations, the nonprofit sector is a \$1.1 trillion industry, employing 19 million full-time employees and representing the world’s eighth largest economy. The most common political term we use to describe these independent citizens’ groups is nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Many prominent NGOs are known as change makers, leaders in promoting a new planetary consciousness, social innovators or vocal watchdogs of global, regional, national and local public institutions.

Over the past several decades, the status, focus, funding and structure of organizations like NGOs have changed, as is suggested by an excellent study from SustainAbility entitled *The 21st Century NGO: In the Market for Change* (2003). While many twentieth century NGOs fought the system as outsiders, this century’s NGOs are increasingly beginning their work from inside the system. Those twentieth century outsiders tended to focus on problems, often defining them as symptoms of market failure, and generated funding by appealing to donors’ anger or guilt about contemporary problems. Twenty-first century NGOs, on the other hand, are more likely to focus on solutions (some of which might even be delivered through the market) and work to convince donors that their money is better seen as a social investment. Finally, while last century’s NGOs grew from small operations into institutions, this century’s NGOs are looking to networks as a source of continued growth and effectiveness.

Civil society organizations function in the broader context of civil society as a whole. A healthy civil society is composed of a diverse set of organizations, which can be seen as a pyramid. At its broad foundation, you will find myriads of often informal neighborhood and self-help groups, which constitute the base of the civic infrastructure. Further up the pyramid, you will find slightly more formal organizations from fraternities to mutual benefit societies to professional associations, which tend to have a more permanent and professional presence. At the top, you find the global advocacy NGOs from Greenpeace to Amnesty International. Concerned with issues that impact people across the world, these groups are the most prominent in the media, but they could not exist without the robust civic infrastructure that forms the foundation of the pyramid.

Whatever we call groups of citizen activists – nonprofits or NGOs, CSOs or civil society – they seem to be growing in number, scope, scale and influence. These groups and networks can best be described as undertaking “private actions for the public good.” At their best, they combine the freedom of action, flexibility and entrepreneurship of the private (or business) sec-



tor with the sense of civic responsibility of the public (or government) sector.

Maybe it is this dual character – as flexible and trustworthy actors – that can explain CSOs’ success. Younger, smaller civic associations are less bound by rules, traditions, powerful interests and procedures than bureaucratic governments. As we know, freedom allows creativity, and the result is that CSOs can more easily engage in social ventures, untested enterprises and projects involving considerable risk. Citizens’ groups are also not bound by the electorate, and if they wish, they can oppose public opinion (in an attempt to change it) much longer than elected officials. This freedom and flexibility make up the most important organizational advantages CSOs enjoy vis-à-vis governmental institutions. CSOs are often driven by issues not championed by either government or business, issues the public considers to be worthy causes abandoned by more powerful interests. This independence from business and government influence (either real or perceived) gives citizens’ groups a certain uncompromised moral authority.

Ironically, the very attributes that constitute strengths for CSOs can also be weaknesses. While freedom and flexibility make the day-to-day operation of civic associations easier and more efficient, these characteristics can lead to legitimate questions about a CSO’s accountability and sustainability. To proactively address these issues, any good citizens’ group should ask itself two questions: What is our mission? To whom are we responsible? Civic associations must have clear answers to these questions and must evaluate all their actions by the standards set by their answers.

In addition to understanding their internal imperatives, citizens’ groups must see how they fit into the broader universe of democratic practices and institutions. As I argued in the CIVICUS publication *From States to People: Civil Society and its Role in Governance* (1999), it is important to understand that civil society complements, not rivals, representative democracy. Civil society is about participation, while parliamentary or representative democracy is about representation. The civic politics of citizen participation and the “party politics” of representation have a healthy dynamic. Too often, various groups upset this dynamic by claiming to speak “on behalf of the people,” as alternatives to politicians and political parties. These generalizations – claiming the voices of all people – are not only false and misleading; they can undermine the credibility of CSOs. In addition, these claims suggest that duly elected politicians and public officials do not act on behalf of the people, and that they, en bloc, are morally inferior to citizen activists. Citizen participation carries its own legitimacy; it does not need to borrow it from politics.

In other words, we need CSOs not because they represent the people but because through them we can mobilize additional energies, improve our lives and simply get things done. The increasing tendency of CSOs to focus on solutions and tap the power of networks will only improve their efficacy. However, civil society is just one part of a healthy democracy. While no democracy can function without a vibrant, independent civil society, civic activism cannot replace fair elections, responsible parliaments and good, efficient governance.

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