The Promise of Civil Society

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IMAGINE A time when there were no formal institutions, a time when there were no governments, no civil society organizations, no businesses or no national boundaries. Then imagine that it was nevertheless a time of human existence. It was an era with its own set of rules and regulations, even though they were never written down. This, too, was a time when there was governance. It was when social organization depended on a very deep sense of community. It was a time when responsibilities were shared by community members, when conflict resolution strategies prevailed, when there was less of a sense that some sectors of society were beneficiaries and others were providers. We cannot turn back the clock of time to this era, but reminding ourselves where we came from as humanity should help us better imagine the potential that lies in the future.

If, like Rip Van Winkle, you had just awoken after a four decade-long slumber, you might think that the world at the turn of the millennium had solved many of its major problems and that civil society was one of the principal reasons why you would be somewhat right and somewhat wrong.

We talk about civil society and its role in eradicating poverty, in promoting democracy and good governance, and in resolving social conflict and protecting human rights—among a myriad of other areas related to the human condition. It is increasingly common to see civil society organizations represented at most major international conferences, participating alongside their governments in discussions dealing with the foremost social, economic and environmental problems of the day. And these are just the more visible manifestations of a global phenomenon in which citizen-inspired associations have spread through millions of villages and communities leaving more democratic forms of governance and improved social and economic welfare in their wake.

There is sometimes a disposition among those of us involved in civil society movements to talk and write about it as if it was the gospel truth of the twentieth century. This sometimes includes the inclination to over-glorify its accomplishments and romanticize about its innate goodness as well as its acknowledged place in world affairs. While this is a normal human tendency, it does not advance the cause of civil society in the long run. The idea and promise of civil society lies as much in its potential as it does in the very real achievements that it has produced to date. We are learning as we go along in many cases what our appropriate role is and how best we can contribute to the public good. Our greatest enemy is arrogance and the notion that a strong civil society is an end in itself rather than the means by which citizens express their civic side in the collective enterprise which we all share. The truth is, the promise of civil society lies before us.
From a Local Monologue to a Global Conversation

Less than a decade ago, civil society was a concept discussed by political scientists in the sanctuary of ivory towers. Certainly, there was little empirical evidence of its existence outside of a handful of democracies, if voluntary association and associational autonomy are considered its fundamental requisites. Even then, it was largely referred to as the third, non-profit, voluntary, or independent sector. These terms are generally non-threatening to states, whatever their dispositions. In the developing South a unique form of organization, the non-governmental organization or NGO, emerged basically defining itself by what it was not, rather than what it stood for—and remains to this day deeply embedded in our daily lexicon. Such was the state of affairs of man as he approached the last decade of this millennium.

Then the walls came tumbling down. It was as if the beckoning of a new millennium led the human collective to say enough was enough. The literal coming down of authoritarian regimes was matched by the symbolic awakening of democratic impulses in men and women from Bangladesh to Bolivia and from Uzbekistan to Uganda. The totalitarian monologue of the autocrats was replaced by a global conversation of citizens. The ensuing cacophony was as music to the ear of the pluralist as silence had been the rule of the overlord. Listening closely, however, there was a common melody running through these many and diverse songs. Simply put, the lyrics uppermost on the minds of citizen songwriters were about addressing the same old problems in this new context.

But, the art of creating beautiful music together for the newly liberated beyond the confines of home or clan level had either never fully developed or was rusty as a result of decades if not centuries of disuse. It was not surprising therefore that many of these attempts at making music were sometimes characterized by discordant notes, just as the promise of citizen participation was poised to breathe new meaning and life into the very notion of democracy. The tragedy of ethnic cleansing, the reality of religious intolerance and the deepening of social and economic inequalities also found its way onto the score sheets of the last decade. It was also the decade in which complacency seemed to descend on the older constitutional democracies and doubts and questions began to surface about the quality, and vibrancy of their institutions. In the United States, for example, growing levels of disillusionment with the political process would see ever-decreasing levels of electoral participation. In the November 1998 congressional elections, a mere 14 percent of the total electorate participated in that important act of formal electoral democracy. In some countries, questions about media monopoly began to raise concerns about whether citizens had true access to reliable information on a range of social and political choices or whether it had been replaced by a new orthodoxy reflecting pop culture rather than reasoned debate.

Notwithstanding the latter concerns, the conversation taking place among citizens as well as entire societies is really about trying to determine the most effective way to create a healthy and sustainable public life. Much of today’s conversation will be about the proper role, or the appropriate balance of state, market, and civil society in public life, particularly in defining the public good and in making it happen. This is not a discussion limited to the new democracies. It is just as heated and passionate in the old ones.
Civil Society: A Legitimate Public Actor

To understand civil society—and particularly what needs strengthening and how to go about doing it—requires identifying its principal functions as the first step in defining what a strong and healthy civil society would be. The attempt here is to locate civil society both conceptually and operationally in terms of its role as a public actor in the promotion of sustainable human development, the eradication of poverty and the building of a healthy public life—whether at the local, national or global levels.

While sustainable human development is the broad context within which civil society is being discussed, there is a tendency among policymakers and practitioners working in the field of “development,” particularly northerners, to view this as relevant only in the South. Thus, the discussion of civil society and the allied concepts of social capital, democracy, and governance is considered as an interesting but moot academic exercise, or perhaps as the elusive magic bullet theory is capable of delivering the poor from their misery and the rich from their obligations. Neither view does much to enlighten this field of inquiry nor make it comprehensible in a way that has immediate relevance to improving the human condition. What is it, about the concept of civil society that has relevance and resonates in the more familiar context of our daily lives—whether we live in Belgium, Bolivia, Bangladesh, Botswana, Bahrain, or Bulgaria?

The opening quote from the Human Development Report 1992 leads to a number of fundamental questions related to “how” and “which” human beings come to make choices about “long-term societal goals.” Who, for instance, makes the decisions about the trade-off between jobs and environmental protection? Or about the share of public resources devoted to improving the conditions of the “poor” versus the “non-poor”? Or about the nature of the tax system, and how it distributes the benefits of economic growth?

This basic issue about how decisions are made and who makes them is at the center of the discussion of civil society. In fact, the broader context of sustainable human development (SHD) is only partially about civil society, or it would be under ideal conditions. What SHD is actually describing are the conditions for a healthy public life, where civil society is but one of several legitimate realms of public action making and implementing choices about societal goals, a process defined here simply as “governance.”

When sustainable human development is reduced to its barest essence, it is about how human beings create a healthy public life that is then sustained over time because it is able to address societal or sustainable development problems effectively. The principal issue related to creating and sustaining a healthy public life is finding the right balance between state, market, and civil society in making and implementing of societal decisions.

The current debate in the northern welfare or post-welfare countries is about the roles of these three public spheres in defining societal goals and then determining who best can implement programs to reach them. This is not a new debate, although the particular issues may be, but an ongoing dialogue that has existed for as long as citizens have had the freedom
to participate in making public choices. In the North, this has been a bit more than two
centuries. In most of the countries of the developing South and transitioning East, the
dialogue has been going on at best for no more than a few years or decades.

In summary, civil society’s principal role is in contributing to the creation of a healthy
public life as one of several spheres of legitimate societal action. In its’ simplest conception,
civil society is the network of autonomous associations that rights-bearing and responsibility-
laden citizens voluntarily created to address common problems, advance shared interests, and
promote collective aspirations. As a legitimate public actor, civil society participates along-
side state and market institutions—not replacing them—in making and implementing public
policies designed to resolve collective problems and advance the public good.

The Citizen: The Building Block of Civil Society

The Unifying Force in Sustainable Development and a Healthy Public Life

Civil society is not an end in itself but rather the means by which citizens advance and defend
their interests in public life through collective action. As such, civil society is no stronger
than the citizens that compose its many and diverse associations and institutional manifestations.
The first attribute of a strong civil society, and therefore the key ingredient in any effort at
capacity building, is a well-informed and active citizenry participating in public affairs through
associations they voluntarily form. From this fundamental view of the relationship between
the citizen and civil society, it follows that what we term as citizen organizations—the lowest
level of voluntarily formed and autonomous civil society organization—are the building
blocks of civil society and by extension of democracy and sustainable human development.

Human beings are not just political animals concerned with power in their role as citizens.
They are social beings who freely associate when permitted to and develop a range of
relationships to address their many personal needs. They are also economic beings that both
produce and consume to ensure a range of material and physical requirements. Finally, as
natural beings, they are a part of yet transcending nature through their spirituality. Because
the political sphere of human activity provides the broader set of rules and institutional
arrangements governing these other three spheres, the citizen or political being can be
considered the first among equals. As such, we can view the citizen and citizen organization
as the base unit of civil society but also of sustainable development as they unify the social,
economic, environmental as well as political realms of human activity.

The Defining Feature of Civil Society: A Political Concept

Civil society is linked both conceptually and practically to the promotion of democracy, to
good governance, to a hybrid of the two (democratic governance), and ultimately to sustainable
development. Underlying the notion of civil society is the understanding that it is fundamentally
a political concept, which is what distinguishes it from other terms much in use today,
including the voluntary, independent, third, philanthropic, non-profit, or nongovernmental
organization (NGO) sector. Each of these other terms describes a characteristic of civil
society, but none of them provide the defining feature. In short, civil society is a political concept because it is concerned with exercising power to advance and defend the economic, social and political interests of citizens.

It is for this reason—the potential for political action—that national governments have historically attempted to keep citizens from joining together to address their collective problems. It is for this reason too that many of the inter-governmental organizations that are owned by national governments have been hesitant to support the emergence and strengthening of civil society. And finally it is for this reason that market actors have supported the policies of less than progressive governments as well as avoided developing collaborative relationships with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) even when it would have advanced their own economic interests.

It has been this adversarial role, or to put it more positively, the countervailing function that has been the defining feature of civil society’s relationship to state and market actors in the past. The new political context that has emerged, marked by democracy and citizen participation, has increasingly led to more collaborative modes of relating between them.

In this collaborative conception of sustainable development, the primary issue in formulating a strategy to promote and strengthen civil society, therefore, is how to make civil society an effective as well as legitimate partner in governance matters at the local level and beyond.

**Strong and Healthy Civil Society: Attributes and Dimensions**

As a basic premise, there is clearly little unanimity of thought about what constitutes a strong and healthy civil society; rather, it is a contested concept, similar to those of democracy, governance, human rights, and even sustainable development. There is no universally agreed upon definition of civil society. Notwithstanding this ongoing debate, however, we see a consensus beginning to emerge on a number of the features and characteristics that underlie a strong and healthy civil society, particularly as they manifest themselves in operational terms. The following are what we consider to be the more important of them.

**Voluntary Association and Associational Autonomy**

Any discussion concerning the characteristics of a strong civil society must necessarily start with the set of **preconditions** that make it possible. The first, not surprisingly, is an enabling environment that permits both **voluntary association** and **associational autonomy**. Unless freedom of association is constitutionally guaranteed and enforced, and unless a space is carved out of public life that permits voluntarily formed associations the right to act independent of the state and market, then civil society cannot be said to exist. As such, we would go so far as to say that prior to 1990 in a large part of the world, civil society did not exist. Working backwards from this fact, it is equally evident that the citizen, as one endowed with a set of inalienable rights, also did not exist. And unfortunately today, there remain far too many countries, including some very large ones, where neither citizens nor civil society nor
democracy have yet to make their appearance in a significant manner. Leading to the conclusion that neither sustainable development nor a healthy public life has yet been achieved.

**Institutional Pluralism**

Assuming the right of citizens to be able to come together voluntarily outside of the state and market to pursue collective or public purposes, one of the principal signs of a budding civil society is the *density* and *diversity* of associational life—what might be called institutional pluralism. The greater the density and diversity of associational life the more channels (choices) citizens have to express their interests (voice) in public life. Moreover, institutional pluralism provides citizens with overlapping membership based on their varied interests, and thus cuts across a range of societal cleavages (e.g., race, class, ethnicity, region) that have tended to divide rather than unite people.

**The Structural and Functional Dimensions: Specialization and Differentiation**

At a certain point emerging civil societies will reach a *critical mass* of associational density and diversity. When this happens we can begin to anticipate a process in which the structure of civil society begins to differentiate and CSOs begin to specialize in terms of the *function* they undertake. If we can conceive of a strong and mature state or market—realms of human activity to which civil society is often juxtaposed—as comprised of specialized as well as multi-purpose organizations and institutions, then why not civil society?

The spectrum of associations comprising a strong civil society can be characterized as falling into three structural strata each with different functions. These strata correspond roughly with the organizations’ geographic scope and with their relationship to the citizen. Thus, a robust civil society generally resembles a pyramid, whose base is a vast array of primary-level organizations channelling citizen voices outward and upward in dialogue with public decision makers. In the middle is a smaller set of intermediary associations that provide support to primary-level organizations, but also funnel citizen voices further upward. At the apex one finds networks that echo the voices of these lower-stratum CSOs in national arenas. Here there is also a cohort of specialized organizations that support civil society as a whole, providing policy analysis, training, sectoral and other services that help amplify the “collective voice” of civil society as a partner in governance.

**The Normative Dimension: The Values Domain**

The final characteristic included in this conception of a strong civil society is what we may term the normative dimension. This implies that civil society, as distinct from the state and market, is considered the “values” domain, with a set of civic norms and democratic practices that distinguish it from these other realms of human interaction.

The normative dimension is built on the foundation of social capital, or the set of values corresponding behaviors, including trust, reciprocity, tolerance, and inclusion, that enable individuals to feel secure in entering into relationships of mutual benefit and collective action.
Social capital can thus be considered a bridging mechanism between individuals and groups and even across “realms”—that is, from civil society to the state and market. From these fundamental social values that underlie individual motivation and the ability to associate together in common cause, other more civic values including voluntarism, philanthropy, and public-spiritedness grow and develop, providing the civic glue that binds the social fabric into a cohesive whole, and healthy public life.

Simply put, civic norms and the institutional networks that transmit them permit individuals and even groups to transcend their personal and narrow interests and conceive of a public good to which they can contribute and benefit. Not only is social capital the currency of a healthy society, but, equally important, it underlies and promotes healthy transactions that take place in the political and economic life as well.

The Art of Association

Robert Putnam and others have noted, the denser and more diverse the web or network of voluntary associations is in any society, the stronger its ability to generate social capital and promote civic norms. At the same time, it is CSOs, but particularly grassroots citizen organizations that are the principal generators of social capital. The ability of individuals and even groups to associate together is a socially learned trait. The more a person does it, the better he or she becomes. Citizen organizations, because they are based on horizontal relationships among equals, become laboratories where individuals are able to test out their ability to work together without fear of sanction; in fact, they are rewarded for their efforts. The notion of “human agency,” or the ability of individuals to design their own futures and become empowered actors capable of realizing those futures, is first tested out in the familiar setting of a group.

The Free Schools of Democracy: The Locus of Citizenship

As de Tocqueville noted more than two centuries ago, voluntary associations serve as the “free schools of democracy” where individuals are transformed into citizens as they exercise their rights within and accept their responsibilities to the group. Grassroots citizen organizations provide their members with an increased possibility for participating in both organizational decision making and leadership selection, thus strengthening democratic practice and increasing the likelihood of good governance. As increasingly noted, “civil society possesses a pedagogic character since it educates individuals in the values of collective action.”

Ultimately, society itself benefits because the pluralism of institutions, opinions, and views that CSOs nurture prevents any single one from dominating, while it increases the knowledge and experience from which public decisions are made and implemented. Equally important, with a high stock of social capital and the civility it engenders between individuals and groups, there is a far greater likelihood of a widespread commitment to peaceful management of social conflict. And finally, the ability to undertake cooperative social problem solving, a major governance function for associational life at all levels, is itself the result of a high stock of social capital.
Let There Be No Confusion About Who Belongs in Civil Society

I conclude this discussion of what constitutes a strong civil society by addressing one of the most contentious of issues, that is, who belongs and who does not, to civil society. The issue is often framed by the statement that “civil society is often not very civil.” In this regard, we are often referred to the examples of the Ku Klux Klan, the Mafia and a wide range of terrorist organizations, among others. Let us examine these organizations and see if in fact they do belong to the ideal and strong civil society that we have constructed from our vision.

For the sake of argument let us say that these organizations are probably voluntarily formed and maintain their autonomy from the state and market. Some of them may even be membership-based starting at the primary-level and federating into large representative organizations that in fact promote and defend the interests of their members. But we can only stretch this analogy so far. The one criteria that none of these organizations meets is the normative one; that is, they do not demonstrate civic values and democratic practices that include tolerance, inclusion, non-violence, commitment to promoting the public good, and so on.

Ultimately, we believe that a distinction needs to be made between associational life that includes all types of voluntarily formed and autonomous organizations and civil society, which narrows down this universe to those which demonstrate civic norms. In other words, while associational life includes all civil society organizations, civil society does not include all organizations that compose a society’s associational life.

Conclusion

The coming millennium will clearly bring with it many challenges and opportunities. We should resist the temptation of premature triumphalism about the state of humanity as we embrace the coming era. Much remains to be done to ensure that social and economic justice prevail, that sustainable environmental and development strategies are pursued, and that participatory democracy can reign supreme. While we have good reason to celebrate the attainment of formal electoral democracy during the last decades of this concluding millennium, we will have to confront the reality that electoral democracy will face perhaps its biggest challenge in the coming decades. With growing citizen alienation from the public arena and public processes, reflected in part by frighteningly low voter turnouts in elections in many countries, electoral democracy on its own runs the risk of becoming simply a preordained elite legitimization process. Put differently, we will have the form of democracy without the substance.

We frequently need to put the citizen back into the center of the public arena both locally and globally. We need to ensure that we can foster a notion of democracy that is understood as an ongoing sense of ownership of the public arena and the right to citizen participation opportunities that exist on a continuing basis. Why do we return again and again to this issue of civil society and its relation to political life? Because civil society, like the citizen and democracy to which it is intimately tied, is not only a political concept but has once again become a political reality as it was two centuries and two millennia ago.
Our new slogan should be “think both locally and globally and act both locally and globally,” since the realities of globalization now deprive us of the luxury of national parochialism. As we attempt to mediate the pros and cons of globalization, we should again ensure that we are driven by an agenda that puts the majority of humanity at center of our thoughts and deliberations. Whether we succeed or not will depend, to a large extent, on the capacity of leaders in CSOs and government and the business sectors, to listen and to learn from the experiences and aspirations of the vast majority of the poor marginalized peoples throughout the world. Ignoring these voices and concerns runs at our own peril.