



## Harnessed and unharnessed energies - time for a new approach to NGOs?

To what extent has the NGO model fulfilled its intended mission – and what is the need and place for formally **registered associations** in the future? What about the uncharted territory of individual, ad-hoc and informal groups' energies as the driving force of the civil society?

Over the last two decades, NGOs have drawn their appeal from a series of features: predictability, institutional reaction, the possibility of a track record, responsibility, representativeness. The top-down approach (from donors and facilitators to grass-root NGOs) was arguably the best way of activating civil society, but was it the only one, and where do we go from here? **Professionalism** comes with maturity, but with maturity comes mannerism too. NGOs are at all larger risk of sliding from “know why” to “know how”, doing projects just because we know how to do it and to keep ourselves in business. Is there a need and a chance to **reconnect** CSOs to the people whose interest they claim to represent?

## On civil society, citizenship and the role of civic organizations

**Ioana Avadani (moderator):** We know from school that a question well asked is half of a good answer. Our most important resource for this session is the people of this Forum. Do you agree?



**Participant:** for me civil society is the amount of people we could get to come here today – how many of them can we get to actively participate.

**Ioana Avadani:** How many people do you think we could invite here, how many people [from our societies] do participate? How many people do you feel support you in your activities? And how many people can participate in our activities?

**Mike Edwards:** Theoretically everyone, but in practice not everyone. I do think it is a bit naïve, perhaps unhelpful and certainly unnecessary to believe that pure universal unformed social energy will be enough to get us where we want to go, at some point you have to achieve some focus and direction. The problem is that it is going to be partial and exclusive to some extent, and not everyone can participate in everything all the time. I see NGOs simply as a support system for broad based social energy of the kind that we would all like to encourage, not something that takes over and dominates organic processes of people coming together and solving problems for themselves, but social energy, like all energies, needs support to be sustained and channeled in useful directions. NGOs are just resources for civil society and civil society is the totality of everyone getting involved as much as possible.



**Nilda Bullain:** I think the expectation was that NGOs can help build civil society, and that is what is being questioned now, because when you look at the western societies we can see that when you have good citizens they can build good and effective NGOs, and the question for me is whether it works the other way around, whether good or effective NGOs can build good citizens? The question about NGOs and civil society comes back to the concept of citizenship culture, where citizenship is broader than a voter and a taxpayer. For me citizenship means taking responsibility for your own life, taking responsibility for what happens to you, the course of your life, for your decisions and it is not so much about altruism, solidarity and freedom although those can be part of it, but it is about being a citizens,



**Ioana Avadani:** NGOs have been treated consistently as a work of love, as something we do because of the goodness of our hearts. Also linguistically in some parts of the region charity means giving away because you want to. Actually, however, what civil society means is to be representing yourself, participate in shaping up your own future.



**P:** Helping a German minority choir of Hungarian smaller towns – is that civil society?

**Codru Vrabie:** To me civil society is not a thing, and it is not a concept, but it is a process. For me civil society is a transmission belt that boils up or boils down



NGOs are a support system for social energy

Can NGOs build good citizens?

values from the masses up to the elite, and then from the elites down to the masses, and it helps all of us grow. [...] Organizations themselves simply pick up the transmission belt, issues from the masses and bring them to the elite that are making decisions.

**Ioana Avadani:** Are you aware that you are using a metaphor that was used under communist times for the trade unions, the transmission belt?



**Codru Vrabie:** Yes, but the trade unions are just as all civil society organizations the result of 2 fundamental freedoms: freedom of association and entrepreneurship, if you bring all of these things together what you get is a number of persons concerned with respect to public affairs who gather together to solve a problem. They represent and try to push their interest. Whether it is personal very private as in the case of trade unions and owners associations, or if it is more of a public altruistic as an organization that is fighting xenophobia for instance, or fighting for the rights of animals. What you need primarily is citizens, however the question is: what turns a person into a citizen? My very personal answer is frustration.



Civil society is a transmission belt

**P:** Slovak extremist nationalist groups are full of joy there is a lot of enthusiasm, and yet we feel that there is something which is not really civil society. On the other hand, we have business men, in this civic initiative around the protest against waste dump there were a lot of businessmen involved. There was a lot of small wine businesses, people who were from the community, who were not NGOs not organized anyhow but just they felt that their own interest is touched by the issue and they were involved. So it doesn't fit. What is really important I think is that it is a question of values, there is a list of values we feel which are civil and which are not, I think this is something we can all agree on.

**Nilda Bullain:** Civil society is not just about the process but it is about the values. Of course there is one view of civil society that says there is one good civil society and one bad civil society, so those who represent different kind of values than those we represent in this room are part of civil society just the same. The other thing is about frustration when I talk about this culture of citizenship, ok frustration can be the first step maybe, in other cases there is something else. What is important is the ability to taking that frustration into something constructive, where you take initiative, you take responsibility and you follow up. When people do that the first time and they are not successful, they unfortunately lose interest and motivation, and this is what I mean by saying that we don't really have this culture, if people try once and then fail, often they say ok it's not for me, I am not successful doing this,



Turning frustration into something constructive

### On the past and imported models

**Codru Vrabie:** 20 years ago somebody decided that we were going to shift towards liberal democracy - that means someone made that decision that we are going to import another model. With that dog came the flees, which is the civil society model probably with the NGOs that go with it.



Civil society is the flees that comes with the dog of liberal democracy

**P:** I am from the Czech republic, in an organization running already for 15 years, and I don't feel that I am imported from anyone I believe that the majority of the NGOs in Czech Republic I feel that genuinely rooted in genuine com-





munities, and I think we articulate certain important issues, public interest as a minority but parties are as minority as we are, and we try to influence policy and sell our ideas and I really don't feel that I am imported, although some of the funds that we have are from the Soros foundation.

**Ioana Avadani:** To summarize, even if the model of NGOs may be imported, the need that underlies the organization is there, so you fill this model with basic local needs.



**Nilda Bullain:** I am also not happy with that whole assumption about imposition and imported models, because I don't believe there is such a thing as an organic natural development of a country. We live in a very complex world, development is extremely complex and the way political and economic and social systems develop have always in the whole history been affected by a lot of factors including foreign and so called outside factors. The way it is presented makes it look like everything that is coming from the outside is not good because it is not natural and everything that is coming from inside is good because it is natural, and that is so totally not true. Coming back to the question about whether we are different at all to an association of homeowners, I don't think we are so different at all, we are all part of civil society. The only difference is the interest we are trying to pursue. Pretty much this whole group has decided to trying to build civil society, we are trying to implant some values in our societies that are organically not there, but still we are from those societies and we are trying to change it from the inside and some of the donors are trying to do that from the outside. I think a lot of times this imposition issue comes from donors who are guilty because they are trying to impose something from the outside, or the guilt felt by people who have used that money but has not been very successful.



Imported or not - "foreign factors" has always shaped development

**P:** We are doing a pretty solid disservice to the civil society that was going on before communism, to say that this is all imported, as we are talking about it right now, is to say that civil society started in 1989. Which I think is paternally false. Before communism at least in our community there was a lot of both charity and philanthropy going on – during communism there was activism there was change there was people associated, I think this is something worth considering. Imports happen in terms of some frameworks, but at that point what choice was there, if we do swallow wholesale free market economies and say democracy is the way to go, we got to name the flees that came with the dog. I am not saying I love what happened but I am just saying that this should not be left out of the discussion.

Civil society didn't start in 1989

## Challenges and opportunities for the future

**P:** The Civil Society Forum managed to provoke my thoughts and hopefully everybody else's. [One of the challenges according to me] is a battle between these different types of organizations. The idea of being imported is actually important because it creates disturbances and challenges to us as a sector which cannot unite. Ivan Krastev mentioned that NGOs may be the next bubble, what I believe can be done on a local level to prevent that bubble from bursting, is to try to work in more partnerships with each other, and not with each other alone, but also in partnerships with all of the community. not to confirm the idea that NGOs are not being able to work collectively because of us [who work in them]



being too much individuals.

The myth of representativity

**Mike Edwards:** I wanted to comment on another myth – and that is the myth of representation being so important to the NGO world. It's become almost a fixation and unfortunately it has become a big stick, for us to beat ourselves with or for others to beat us with. In a way which is quite dangerous or can be quite dangerous to the purposes we are trying to pursue, certainly in the United States this is true, with people now being excluded from public debate because they are not "representative". Most NGOs just claim to be useful in supporting the struggles of others, and that should be the test to which they are held to account.



**Ioana Avadani:** Putting us in the position to ask ourselves, what kind of job do we deliver? - is very important.



**Mike Edwards:** People will always organize around their passions, what they enjoy, what angers them and what frustrates them, not because an NGO, a foundation or a donor is doing something. People always come together to undertake collective action to achieve purposes that motivate them. However NGOs are important to these citizen projects, it's not like they are squeezing out the life blood of real citizen action. They can be a connective tissue and a support system for civic engagement that otherwise wouldn't be so strong. You need ideas, you need films being made, you need advocacy, you need technical support you need financing in certain ways, those are all very practical ways in which NGOs can be central and useful to releasing and helping to channel that joyful self expression of citizen action. They don't replace it, they simply complement and support it. And yes, if we have lost that sense of joy and love and anger in our work, then we have lost the most important generative principle of a civil society worthy of the name.

**Ioana Avadani:** It is very interesting to see how much reserves for celebration we have, even very thorny issues such as democracy in Belarus was celebrated by concerts and music, I think somehow we feel oppressed by our own seriousness, we feel limited by our own desire to be institutional and we somehow burn ourselves out forgetting about what actually motivates us this kind of energy.



**Nilda Bullain:** the discussion about joy reminded me about 2 weeks ago when we had a study tour group where we were suppose to show NGOs from Uzbekistan how NGOs work in Hungary. We organized the study tour, they went to visit all types of NGOs, from big national advocacy organizations who don't accept money from the government, to social service NGOs who are financed with government contracts, small labor groups etc. When we had the last day debriefing I had a déjà vu, because what I saw in their eyes and the words they used to express their feelings, were exactly the way I felt twenty years ago when I was in a similar study tour in the United States, maybe it was around 1993. Back then I saw what is possible and the breath and richness of civil society and organizations which were active – and now 16 years on I can say it is possible in my country. I lived to see that, it is not a wish anymore. Honestly here we are after 20 years – and I have a little bit of a feeling that we are doing the East European thing, the complaints, the veining, focusing on all the problems. I think we have gone a long way.

It happens around passions



We have come a long way!

**Codru Vrabie:** If people find a value that is worth promoting and they are very concerned about, and they have trust in their own ability that they can do something, then they also have the enthusiasm to go all the way and get it done. That feeling of actually getting the work done, doing something that can change the world around you in a way that will bring you peace of mind and it is all about the people that get the job done. NGOs are just an instrument that will help us to get some money or help us get connected, but it is the individuals and their own concern that actually make this whole thing roll. And if you need funds – you have access to it, you just have to find the people who are either the concerned as you are or enthusiast as you are.



**P:** In my country, Ukraine, NGOs which protect general democratic values, not concrete needs as such are being funded from foreign money, this other activism is based on the voluntary base.

**A diverse  
eco system**

**Mike Edwards:** My conclusion is that civil society is an eco system, just like a natural eco-system where you have many different life forms. Civil society is strong and healthy, not when all organizations are or do the same things or when we all speak with the same voice (because that is never going to happen) but where there is real diversity and where the connections are strong between different life forms. NGOs are an important life form in that ecosystem and I would hate for us to forget that and not make the most of it.



**Nilda Bullain:** I would like to pose a warning against the participation fetish, because I think that it is a bit dangerous to simplify the discussion from civil society through NGOs to civil society through participation, there is a lot of question about what we participate in and how etc, the issue is more complex.



**Codru Vrabie:** If you simply have something to say and do, it is unharnessed energy from a civic group of some sort, - and you don't feel you need an NGOs, then don't create one.

**Ioana Avadani:** Let's keep in mind that it is the people that are the main fundament. Civil society, NGOs, non-NGOs, harnessed or unharnessed energies, actually what we are talking about is people and the way they promote, defend or identify their interests. And I think as long as we have people in mind, the values will follow and the organizational form will just happen.

