

What Happened to Civil Society?

REPORT FROM SEMINAR AT SIDA CIVIL SOCIETY CENTER, 18–20 FEBRUARY, 2008



PHOTOS: GLOBAL REPORTING

A Success or Failure of Civil Society?

Activists fear civil society is losing its ideals when NGOs take on the role of service providers in the aid industry, thus losing their independence from government. Meanwhile, there is a tendency within civil society to avoid politics. Young people favour other forms of solidarity than member-based organisation, which threatens the constituency of civil society. Some argue that it is not a loss of ideals but rather the beginning of new organisational forms.

In February representatives from various organisations from Africa, Western and Eastern Europe met at the Sida Civil Society Center to discuss the challenges facing civil society. The background to the meeting was a discussion that emerged in 2007 on a civil society that has lost political space in formulating the development agendas. “We didn’t understand why this was happening and we have been struggling with the answers ever since,” said Brian Pratt, from the UK-based organisation INTRAC, who led the international seminar.

The discussions preceding the seminar came to the conclusion that there are several factors involved in the shrinking space of the civil society. One is caused by the effect of the “War on Terror”, “a great excuse to

close the space of the Civil Society,” said Brian Pratt. Another cause was the dominance of the neo-liberal theory together with a lack of a political discussion on poverty. The third cause was the loss of identity caused by the massive growth of non-governmental organisations and the commercialisation of civil society in the aid industry over the past 20 years.

“Civil Society is on the back foot, constrained and disempowered. Other actors are taking on the models that civil society has used, and that is not negative,” said Finn Heinrich from CIVICUS, an organisation based in South Africa whose role has been to bridge the divide between southern and northern NGOs.

“The state is not the same as it was in the 1980s and the market is not the same either. And civil society is

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also changing. Some of us belong to the old guard and ask what is happening to us? Young people turn away from our organisations to do other things they value as solidarity but in a different form,” Mr Heinrich continued.

No common ground was found on replacing the neo-liberal economical theory with a common political ideology to “get back on the development agenda.” Some even argued that the mere suggestion of forming a strategy to the development agenda was a form of “manipulation” belonging to a hierarchic European structure of the past.

Brain Pratt described the dominating theory as “simplistic economic orthodoxy” or “a revisited trickle-down-theory,” which stems from the Chicago School and Milton Freedman. The reason for the strong return of neo-liberalism was, he said, the economic success of China and India. The space left for civil society is to take care of what the state and the market have failed to deal with, which is largely the poor and the marginalised majority.

David Ndi from Kenya, previously a World Bank employee and representing the Kenya Leadership Institute, questioned the relevance of the analysis of the “new economic orthodoxy”. From his experience the “intelligentsia or old left” had lost the argument and used the neo-liberal critical analysis as a way of excluding others from the debate.

Pim Verhallen representing ICCO from Netherlands replied that “poverty is not a natural disaster and the lack of equality needs to be politically described.” He added that poverty is part of the neo-liberal formula the World Bank and IMF impose on developing countries and asked how much inequality a democracy can accept? “Why has the political dimension of poverty slipped away from us?”

James Taylor, with the South African Centre for Development Practice, sees the European way of thinking and “these strains of incredible stories on the Chicago School,” as part of the same paradigm, which needs to

be changed. “My view is that Civil Society contributes by bringing the diverse needs of a society and its people from the periphery to the centre.”

Studies performed by CIVICUS show a clear trend in the world where civil society organisations stay far away from politics and that “politicians are seen as the bad guys.” The exception from the de-politicisation trend is Latin America.

“We seem to see ourselves as de-politicised while we are described as too political by the rest of the world,” said Saso Klekovski from the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation.

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The aid Industry

A larger consensus was found when discussing the internal challenges for civil society. Most, or all, agreed that part of the problems facing civil society today is caused by the huge success of non-governmental organisations, or rather the rapid growth of the aid industry. “The non-profit corporatisation of the civil society is a result of people from the private sector coming in with their view on development,” said Brian Pratt and added that growth may be the wrong strategy for civil society. “We are also the problem. Where has the original vision gone? We think we have been successful but all we have done is to create franchises.”

Some went as far as suggesting that the industry of so called non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs) should be disassociated from civil society. The same applies to the large non-governmental organisations from the North, the international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), who have moved from partnership with southern NGOs to run-

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ning programmes. The aid organisations were accused of swamping the arena, stealing capacity from the south at the same time as they are not independent since they rely heavily on government or multilateral funding.

Lennart Reinius, from Plan Sweden, one of the INGOs criticised, agreed to many of the problems described above. “But my interest lay in children rights and Plan works with a children rights approach. I believe in using civil society to further our own ends from a rights approach,” he said and added that the constituency of Plan International is problematic since it includes both those who fund Plan and the children in the South. “Our challenge lay in how we can let the voices of the children be incorporated into our governance system and not only used for the purposes of advocacy and fund raising.”

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Civil Society as a Trigger

For Nicklas Hällström from the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, whose publication *Development Dialogue* has debated civil society and development, views the role of civil society “as being the driving force of change. Any change for the better must have the Civil Society as a trigger. We cannot trust the governments or the international institutions to lead the way.”

“There is a new way of thinking, evolving around the new science, chaos and complexity theory, an ecological view of living systems theory. It’s an enormous new way of a process induced change,” said James Taylor. The participants agreed to continue the discussions

but asked for a broader participation, particularly with regard to including more women.

Pim Verhallen described the change ICCO, a Dutch umbrella organisation he represents, is going through when changing a model that was evolved in the late 1960s. With the dependence on government funding they had had to move away from what is politically sensitive to the uncontested service provision. “The road we had taken was that of beginning as a partnership relationship with our southern partners to that of being subcontracted by government. We have come to the point where we realise that the administrative burden that comes with the Dutch funding is not helping our partners.”

Dilemmas Facing Civil Society

Saso Klekovski from the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation explained that the growth of civil society in the former communist world had come to an end and they are now moving to indigenize a civil society previously funded by the West. To do this they have to look at what existed there before our civil society was Westernized.

The challenge they face is to “demystify the West” in the debate they have with the nationalists. “During the communist era the ‘West’ was a political term used to criticize anything or anyone, but which is now becoming a geographic term. But with Putin in Russia the term is again being used politically.”

The representatives from Kenya shared some of the experiences with Eastern Europe. As in the case of Macedonia, they also saw a problem with individuals from civil society being co-opted by government structures.

William Ogara, representing Corat Africa expressed the dilemmas of one side “deal with (donor) agencies and at the same time being independent? The second dilemma is how to partner with institutions that we are supposed to watch over.” David Ndi added that the international agencies, represented by INGOs “are not

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citizens of Kenya and therefore not a part of Kenyan Civil Society,” He asked for a broader definition of civil society where business leaders and social entrepreneurs could also be included: “There is an unwillingness with the ‘old left’ to engage with others. They stereotype people although they preach a principle of pluralism. The division of people in stereotypes is a negative influence exported from the north to us in the south.”

The only woman present, Margret Mwaura, also from Corat, said that when the new government came to power they incorporated leading individuals from

civil society in the new government, which made civil society less inclined to criticise them. “We need to be on track with the people and to be that it is important that we listen better to what is going on.”

As a continuation to the discussions above INTRAC will hold a conference on “Whatever Happened to Civil Society?” The conference, which will be held in the Netherlands, 3rd-5th December 2008, will re-examine the concept and role of civil society and focus on its significance in development, human rights and democracy promotion.

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