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Background paper: How should we classify civil society?
A review of mainstream and alternative approaches

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Scholars and development practitioners generally agree on a basic descriptive definition of civil society: it is a sphere of social interaction between the economy and state, composed of actors and organisations that self-organise to advance collective goals.[1] As this definition suggests, the term 'civil society' refers to the space of collective public action as well as the actors and institutions that populate the space. Efforts to analyse civil society, therefore, have primarily focused on disaggregating the actors and organisations within the public sphere in order to draw conclusions about the 'strength' or 'impact' of different elements of civil society.[2]

Mainstream analysis disaggregates civil society by its institutional forms or by particular functions within the development discourse. Classifications have often developed through the experience and needs of the aid industry[3], rather than with reference to political theories of what civil society *does*. The tendency to inadequately differentiate between civil society and the aid industry has meant that the discourse and demands of foreign aid often distort the priorities and constituencies of civil society.[4] Making a clear analytical separation between civil society and the architecture of aid requires a system of classification that addresses what civil society actors do for democracy and development (their function rather than their form), independent of aid agencies. This brief analysis reviews mainstream classification schemes before introducing a proposal for classifying civil society actors by their orientation within political theories of civil society. Examples of the classifications used by mainstream civil society analysis are:

1. **By types of organisations**
To take stock of the diversity of associational life beyond NGOs, some scholars analyse civil society by the purpose and type of organisations. These range from member-based religious organisations and indigenous community organisations to trade unions and sports associations.[5] This approach attempts to avoid imputing a normative bias onto civil society by focusing on purely descriptive categories that could apply just as much in one country as in the next.

2. **By degrees of formality and institutionalisation**
This approach to classification privileges the formality and level of operation of actors within civil society. Bratton initially proposed classification according to three levels of organisations within civil society: community-based, national and international.[6] This approach has been adapted by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to specify the degree of institutionalisation within civil society, and three categories are identified: 'institutionalised groups', 'local organisations', and 'social movements and networks'.[7] While this classification is descriptive, it is an approach oriented towards policy development by aid agencies more than civil society analysis. Level of organisation says little about what civil society actors do; it says more about how partnerships, funding arrangements and reporting can be expected to function.

3. **By 'development functions' within the aid architecture**
Another dominant approach classifies civil society actors according to their role in development. This classification approach was initially proposed by Elliott as a way of differentiating between NGO 'orientations' towards development, which he characterised as 'welfare', 'developmental' or 'empowerment'.[8] The World Bank and other large development

[1] Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato. 1992. *Civil Society and Political Theory.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

[2] Classification schemes mostly disaggregate civil society by groups of organisations, although one notable exception (CIVICUS) attempts to assess the aggregative quality of national civil societies.

[3] Anna Vakil. 1997. "Confronting the classification problem: Toward a taxonomy of NGOs," *World Development* 25(12): 2057-2070.

[4] Lindsay Whitfield. 2003. "Civil Society as Idea and Civil Society as Process," *Oxford Development Studies* 31(3): 379-400. Lindsay Whitfield. 2005. "Trustees of Development from Conditionality to Governance: Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers in Ghana," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 43(4): 641664.

[5] See: Richard Holloway and John Beauclerk. 2007. *Beyond NGOs: Civil Society Organisations with Development Impact.* London: Aga Khan Development Network and INTRAC.

[6] Michael Bratton. 1989. "The politics of government-NGO relations in Africa," *World Development* 17(4): 569–587.

[7] DFID. 2008. "How to Work with Civil Society." Available: www.dfid.gov.uk/aboutdfid/dfidwork/workwithcs/cs-how-to-work-what.asp . Accessed: 14 June 2008.

[8] Charles Elliott. 1987. "Some aspects of relations between the north and south in the NGO sector," *World Development* 15(Supplement): 57–68.

actors have adapted this classification to more precisely specify the development 'results' produced by organisations within civil society. These results may be framed broadly according the following: representation; advocacy and technical inputs; capacity building; service delivery; and social functions.[9] They may also be framed more specifically, such as: promoting peace and building security; advancing development practice; delivering direct development and humanitarian benefits.[10] These approaches frame civil society as an extension or mechanism of the aid industry –organisations that 'produce results for development'. They implicitly assume civil society to be naturally oriented towards mainstream policies and programmes, and thereby exclude or ignore the 'darker' sides of civil society.

4. By client group
The rise of civil society in development has been accompanied by the instrumentalisation of NGOs to advance competing interests. Korten differentiates civil society actors according to their client group: membership-based organisations, voluntary organisations, public service contractors and government initiated organisations.[11] Korten's classification has been dramatically expanded by an array of acronyms that express a wider set of client groups, often specified by the source of financing for civil society actors: Government Organised NGOs (GONGOs), Business-Organised NGOs (BONGOs), Business Interest NGOs (BINGOs), Donor-Organised NGOs (DONGOs), etc.[12] Classifying civil society actors by client group explicitly identifies them as political actors, insofar as they are seen to be advancing narrow sets of interests within the public sphere.

5. By aggregate political strength
While the previous approaches all analyse civil society by disaggregating organisations, the Civil Society Index methodology used by CIVICUS assesses the political strength of an entire national civil society. The CSI 'conceptualises civil society as a political term' and uses four dimensions to gauge the strength of a particular civil society: structure, environment, values, and impact.[13] It assumes that civil society is a universal category that exists in every country, but civil society is evaluated by normative political expectations: that it constitutes an arena of collective public action.

The mainstream approaches to classifying civil society actors reviewed above are each informed by a particular idea of the collective political significance of civil society. The lessons of experience around the world suggest that while civil society is significant for democracy and development, no individual theory of civil society has proven to be correct.[14] It may be more accurate to conclude that civil society has many functions, which cannot all be ascribed to every civil society actor. If we agree to a descriptive definition of civil society as the arena of collective action outside of the state, family and market, then we should anticipate a high degree of contingency in the activity of a civil society. Civil society actors have multiple characteristics that are manifested within different contexts and circumstances based on: history, government, political culture, economy, foreign aid, etc. Drawing upon the role of civil society in political theory, we can identify five functions of civil society that have significance for democracy and development. The actors and organisations that populate the civil society space can be analysed according to these functions:

1. By generating the social basis for a democratic state
From the ancient writings to Cicero to the modern John Locke, civil society has been described as the arena of civic participation that extends the practice of democracy to the grassroots. Democracy is about more than periodic acts of 'political authorisation' through voting – its strength derives from a citizenry that participates in an open and egalitarian public sphere.[15] Civil society actors can make a unique contribution to development by inculcating the habits, norms and behaviours that reinforce democracy. Their capacity to do so relies upon internal organisational procedures of participation, accountability and transparency.

2. By promoting political accountability
Civil society actors may serve as alternative avenues of political representation – outside of party politics – that can exercise government accountability. Alexis de Tocqueville described this function of civil society in the context of early 19th century America, where he found that civic associations provided a bulwark against majority rule by advancing marginal issues and the diverse causes of minority groups.[16] Formal democratic processes tend to be dominated by

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[9] Overseas Development Institute. 2008. "Civil Society Partnerships Programme: Key Terms and Definitions." Available: http://www.odi.org.uk/cspp/Overview/Terms.html . Accessed: 13 June 2008.

[10] Real Lavergne and Jacqueline Wood. 2008. "CIDA, Civil Society and Development: A Discussion Paper," Draft: February 26, 2008. Mimeo.

[11] David Korten. 1987. "Third generation NGO strategies: A key to people-centred development," *World Development* 15(Supplement): 145–159.

[12] Chadwick F. Alger. 1999. "Strengthening Relations Between NGOs and the UN System: Toward a Research Agenda," *Global Society* 13(4): 393-409.

[13] V. Finn Heinrich and Lorenzo Fioramonti, eds. 2008. *CIVICUS: Global Survey of Civil Society, Vol. 2: Comparative Perspectives.* Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.

[14] Stephanie Bailer, Thilo Bodenstein and V. Finn Heinrich. 2008. "What Makes Civil Society Strong? Testing Bottom-Up and Top-Down Theories of a Vibrant Civil Society," V. Finn Heinrich and Lorenzo Fioramonti, eds., *CIVICUS: Global Survey of the State of Civil Society, Vol. 2: Comparative Perspectives.* Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.

[15] Leonardo Avritzer. 2002. *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[16] Alexis de Tocqueville. 2000 [1835/40]. *Democracy in America,* Harvey C Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (trans and eds). Chicago: University of Chicago.

majority or elite interests, and civil society actors promote political accountability through information dissemination, public interest litigation, lobbying, and media campaigns.[17]

3. **By producing social trust, reciprocity, and networks**
Collective public action in civil society is often (although not always) organised through what Robert Putnam calls 'civic community', which constitutes one element of civil society. Civic community is composed of horizontally structured organisations 'that are more or less mutual, cooperative, symmetrical, and trusting'.[18] Such organisations (including everything from extended families and bowling clubs to religious communities and interest groups) generate 'social capital', which consists of trust, reciprocity and networks that enable people to more easily solve collective action problems.[19] Civil society actors can be analysed according to how they promote cooperation and coordination.

4. **By creating and promoting 'alternatives'**
By defining civil society as the space of collective public action, we accept that civil society functions as a battleground over ideas. Scholars are increasingly turning to the political thought of Antonio Gramsci, who offered an ambivalent characterisation of civil society as constituting an 'arena in which hegemonic ideas concerning the organisation of social and economic life are both established and contested'.[20] The ideas that propel collective action in civil society may not necessarily be liberal or 'civil'. Civil society constitutes the space in which democratic alternatives are promoted, but it is also where unsavoury ideologies compete for public legitimacy.

5. **By fighting the state for rights and citizenship**
Finally, civil society actors may organise and mobilise grievances against the state. Within civil society, social movements and organisations may develop alliances with other groups to forge collective struggles featuring the language of rights.[21] Civil society actors demand that the state protect particular rights through guarantees of citizenship and these demands may proceed through legal channels or though civil (or uncivil) disobedience of the law. Where civil society is strong and the state's democratic channels are narrow or weak – as in Nigeria, for example – such action may indeed be violent, while retaining 'civil notions of justice and public accountability'.[22]

The alternative approach to classifying civil society proposed in this brief review has several benefits when held up against the mainstream approaches. Most importantly, it clarifies the definitional autonomy of civil society from the aid architecture. Civil society is not a homogenous entity, it is the space in citizens organise in promotion of diverse interests and forms of action that will likely be inconsistent with each other. By identifying the possible functions of civil society actors, analytical attention can be focused on what civil society *is* instead of confusing it with *what we want it to be*. Separating the empirical from the normative in analyses of civil society helps to illuminate the multiple effects of a changing political environment on civil society – which may strengthen it in some respects while restricting it in others. Ultimately, 'strengthening' civil society involves the erection of legal and political protections of the public sphere, not just the proliferation of NGOs.[23] By expanding the space for free collective public action, a protected public sphere may have multiple and contradictory consequences for democracy and development: liberal and non-liberal groups will compete for public legitimacy and state influence. After all, valuing the role of civil society in development means more than funding like-minded organisations, it relies upon the conviction that people everywhere have the right to publicly organise and advance their interests in freedom.

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[17] Catalina Smulovitz and Enrique Peruzzotti. 2003. "Societal and Horizontal Controls: Two Cases of a Fruitful Relationship," in S Mainwaring and C Welna (eds), Democratic Accountability in Latin America. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[18] Larry Diamond. 1999. *Developing Democracy: Towards Consolidation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

[19] Robert Putnam. 1994. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[20] Anthony J Bebbington, Samuel Hickey, and Diana C Mitlin, eds. 2008. *Can NGOs Make a Difference? The Challenge of Development Alternatives*. London: Zed Books

[21] Joe Foweraker and Todd Landman. 2000. *Citizenship Rights and Social Movements: A Comparative and Statistical Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

[22] Kate Meagher. 2007. "Hijacking civil society: the inside story of the Bakassi Boys vigilante group of south-eastern Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45(1): 89-115.

[23] Lavergne and Wood, 2008.