

Abstract

Civil society, and wider civic space, is considered crucial for global development. An ambiguous and contested concept civil society is associated with the spaces, associational formations and collective actions situated in between the market, the state and family in which people can act, debate and negotiate. Civil society, in its many guises – for example social movements, voluntary bodies, press associations, protests, hometown associations, savings societies – is often promoted as an opportunity for people to express their interests, to hold the state to account and to participate in societal change. This chapter covers the intersections between civil society and global development. It begins by outlining the connections between civil society and global development, asking (why) is civil society important for development? Following this the chapter explores the rise of civil society, both as an object to be strengthened and as a vehicle through which development is enacted, and subsequent critiques of dominant Eurocentric discourses of civil society and its position as a development actor. The final section of the chapter outlines some of the contemporary challenges to civil society; the narrowing of civic space, increasing illiberalism, populist and nationalist political currents, transnational repression and changes in aid architecture.

Civil society and civic space

The rise of civil society

History is full of examples of human desire for ‘collective action in search of the ‘good’ (or better) society’ to live in, from the Peasants Revolt of 1381 to vibrant associational life in 13th century China (Edwards, 2009:1; 2014). Varying forms of collective action and associational life have been termed civil society. Conceptualised very broadly as the space between the market, the state and the family, in which people can “organise, debate and act” (Buyse, 2018: 967), civil society represents one of the most ambiguous terms within political thought (Edwards, 2014).

Civil society, and wider civic space, is seen as a key element of global development, as both an arena to be strengthened and organisational bodies capable of delivering development outcomes. Dominant theories of civil society in the development context are heavily influenced by Eurocentric thinking, which places associational life and social capital at the forefront of civil society and subsequent democratic development (De Tocqueville, 1840; Putnam, 2000). Within global development discourse the term civil society often refers to “formal NGOs and CSOs, often aid- or foreign-funded, involved in service delivery or undertaking a ‘watchdog’ function by holding government and other actors to account. [However], civil society is properly viewed as a broader category of actors that includes the independent media; human rights defenders; professional associations; academia and thinktanks; and social movements such as land and indigenous people’s rights groups, women’s and peasant movements, labour organizations, environmental activists, as well as grassroots and community-based organizations” (Hosseini et al., 2019: 9).

Civil society became integral to the World Bank's good governance agenda during its evolution in the 1990s and 2000s. The good governance agenda placed increased emphasis on the role civil society can play in promoting democratic rights and pro-poor development (Banks & Hulme, 2015). Reports stemming from the Bank in the early 1990s outlined a desire to rehabilitate the state following periods of structural adjustment and alongside a revived state, the idea of good governance was able to free and celebrate civil society, accentuating processes such as participation, decentralisation and democratisation to drive development, alongside economic liberalisation and liberal democratisation (Abrahamsen, 2004; McIlwaine, 1998: 458; Porter, 2003). Civil society was presumed to represent marginalised voices, civil rights and localised interests as a space through which less paternalistic, participatory versions of development could be built and enacted, an arena of social justice and transformation (Banks, Hulme & Edwards, 2015). Civil society was also thought to provide efficient and effective alternatives to the state in the turn towards market-led development, with civil society organisations seen as innovative, flexible and effective development actors in their own right (Banks, Hulme & Edwards, 2015; McIlwaine, 1998).

Despite this continued positive emphasis on the role of civil society within the development arena, including recognition within the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), civil society and civil society organisations, also remain the subject of much conjecture. The next section of this chapter will consider how civil society has been critiqued within the global development context.

Critiques of civil society within global development

The promotion of civil society as a crucial development actor, and one that can both enhance processes of democratisation and produce alternative, more effective forms of development has been examined and critiqued from many angles. Conceptual critiques focus on the Eurocentric biases of models of civil society, with these bodies of work questioning the limitations of civil society framings that exclude diverse civil society-state relations and informal and prosaic associational life. Dominant framings of civil society accentuate Eurocentric forms of social relations, leading to concerns about the relevance of these conceptualisations for understanding civil society more globally (Dagher, 2017; Gready & Robins, 2017). These dominant understandings of civil society rely on Eurocentric conceptualisations of citizenship, individual rights and society-state relations which Chatterjee (2004) contends limits civil society to a narrow section of the urban socio-economic elites in the global South, ignoring the interconnections between the state and civil society and neglecting other forms of engagement between the two, for example co-operation, bargaining or mutual exchange (Jeffrey, 2007). The idea of civil

society may also have limited explanatory power in more global contexts because it does not adequately address the complexities of diverse associational life (Lewis, 2002; Obadare, 2009).

Alongside these conceptual critiques, civil society within the development landscape has also been subjected to multiple practice-based critiques. Optimistic agendas, viewing civil society as the “magic bullet” (Edwards & Hulme, 1995a:5), have inevitably led to counter-critiques, with for example Banks, Hulme & Edwards (2015:707) claiming that “the comparative advantage [of NGOs] was based on ideological grounds rather than evidence”. There has been much debate about whether civil society organisations, and NGOs more specifically, are effective development actors, the complexities associated with evaluating their performance and their ability to ‘scale up’ their work (Edwards & Hulme, 1995a; 1995b; Walton et al., 2016). NGOs have however been able to expand services to marginalised groups (Bandyopadhyay, 2013; Banks, Hulme & Edwards, 2015; Mukute & Taylor, 2013) and studies detail the positive impact they can have on development outcomes, with Townsend & Townsend (2004:274) concluding that “the action of NGOs on balance is good in the short term” and Mohan (2002) conceding that NGOs have had micro-level successes.

Much of the literature, however, highlights how civil society has failed to live up to expectations, with two key themes arising, firstly that civil society is dominated by the elite and secondly that it has become depoliticised. One significant topic for discussion has been the impact of international aid on NGOs and civil society more widely. Literature details the perceived negative influences of international funding, including the development of paternalistic and dependency relations and the dominance of bureaucratic accountability procedures (Banks, Hulme & Edwards, 2015; Henderson, 2002). International aid is also connected to the ‘NGOisation’ and professionalisation of civil society foregrounding formal structures and cultures, with civil society regularly accused of becoming depoliticised, exclusionary, co-opted by the state, and democratically limited, solely focused on service delivery - a “cog in the neoliberal wheel” (Choudry & Kapoor, 2013; Mercer & Green, 2013:107; Label et al., 2019; Sénit, 2020; Sénit & Biermann, 2021). Perhaps key to understanding civil society is to interrogate, recognise and acknowledge the drivers behind privileging a certain type of civil society and, at the same time to search for civil society in its “actual formation, rather than as a promised agenda for change” (Mamdani, 1996:19).

Changing civic space

Despite continued emphasis on the role civil society can play in global development, civil society organisations and other civic actors, are now coming under greater threat from a number of challenges, including, questions

about their effectiveness in comparison to other (newer) development actors, changes in aid architecture and constrained civic space, as Green & Pandya (2016) argue on the global media platform openDemocracy:

‘Civil society organisations (CSOs) worldwide are under significant pressure as restrictions on foreign funding, barriers to registration, intervention in CSOs’ internal affairs, and other forms of harassment have proliferated.’

Civic space can be understood as “the political, legislative, social and economic environment which enables citizens to come together, share their interests and concerns and act individually and collectively to influence and shape their societies.” (Civic Space Watch, 2021). Contemporary trends over the last two decades have seen alterations in this space, associated with a narrowing of civic space for more progressive voices and organisations, alongside a rise in right-wing activities and digital engagement (Hossein et al., 2019). The closing down of civic space is a global phenomenon occurring across political regime types, geographies and levels of development, often connected to ethnonationalist and illiberal political discourses (Brechenmacher & Carothers, 2019; Hossein et al., 2019). A variety of processes have narrowed and restricted the spaces in which civil society can operate. For civil society organisations this has included delegitimization, increased regulation and intimidation (Hossein et al., 2019) as well as restrictions on donor funding, bans on political advocacy, constitutional reforms and restrictions on protests (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; Christensen & Weinstein, 2013; Karim, 2016). Some organisations have closed, some have strategically altered their activities often into a seemingly less political domain and some have reduced their organisational visibility.

Changes in the global economy, alterations in aid architecture, the rise of the private sector actors and the securitisation of development have placed civil society organisations and actors in positions of multiple and increasing vulnerabilities. One concern is the financial landscape in which civil society organisations are now required to operate. Many have experienced decreases in the amount of international donor funding available to them, alongside increasing bureaucratisation and regulation of any funds received. Connected to this loss of financial support from ‘traditional’ international donors, civil society groups are now engaging with more diverse financial processes, utilising different forms of funding in their work, including donations from corporate sponsors (Mendonca, Alves & Nogueira, 2016) and adopting social enterprise models (Cieslik, 2016; Hailey & Salway, 2016).

This narrowing of civic space within an increasingly illiberal political climate reinforces the power of political and social elites, reduces the power of civil society and drives modes of development that disregard civic, political and social concerns (Brechenmacher & Carothers, 2019; Hossein et al., 2019; Krienenkamp, 2017; Poppe & Wolff, 2017). This can be seen in the area of extractive land and resource use and in the promotion of large-scale infrastructure projects that occur in a development landscape that does not allow for challenges from the civic arena, as Hossein et al. (2019: 10) articulate: “Many efforts to silence civil society actors, it seems, do so in order to pave the way for contentious projects to pass without the fear of public scrutiny or effective legal obstacles.” The closing down of civic space then has impacts on the formation and activities of civil society organisations and on the communities, environments and the socio-political causes they advocate for. Whilst civic space may be narrowing for more progressive organisations, Hossein et al. (2019:10) comment civic space may be opening up for “right wing extremists, supporters of authoritarian rule, and cultural and faith-based groups that may be opposed to individual human rights or equality.” The rise of digital civic space, and also the restrictions that can be placed on the digital sphere is increasingly important in the global development context (Kleine, 2018). It is important then to consider the fluidity of civic space, for whom it is closing and opening and the impacts this has. Changes in civic space will play out differently around the world, including how civil society adapts and responds to these changes.

Conclusion

Civil society and wider civic space have long been associated with global development. Dominant models of civil society within the global development context are based on Eurocentric models of associational life, social capital and the ‘good’ governance. Civil society within global development has however been critiqued both conceptually and practically as it has often failed to live up to expectations as the “magic bullet” (Edwards & Hulme, 1995a:5). Civil society and wider civic space remain integral to global development, yet are coming under increasing threats from multiple angles, including illiberal political climates, changes to aid architectures and ethnonationalist and populist discourses. Hossein et al., (2019:3) comment “civic space is a precondition for achieving the... [Sustainable Development Goals] SDGs”. Civil society and wider civic space are important as spaces in which ideas of social and environmental justice and human rights can be nurtured. If civil society operates as a sphere which can represent, engage and nurture the most marginalized then the increasingly restrictive civic environment has the potential to limit the progress made towards reducing injustices (Hossein et al., 2019). Civil society and

civic space are crucial to global development as spaces in which social justice can be fought for, states and the private sector made accountable, and lives and wellbeing improved.

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