

# Civil Society: What Next?

Göran Hydén

## *Introduction*

In 1975, when the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation published its seminal report, *What Now: Another Development*,<sup>1</sup> development was in and civil society was out. At that time the state was viewed as the engine that would make a positive difference in the lives of people. Private and voluntary actors were confined to the margins of the development scene. The assumption was that states on their own were capable of ensuring the security and welfare of citizens; hence, such broad promises for the developing world as ‘health for all’ and ‘universal primary education’. Interestingly, trade unions and other groups were typically incorporated into the political establishment.

Thirty years later, it is the other way around: civil society is in, development out. The bubble of popular expectations about development that characterised the 1970s has since burst for reasons related both to changes in the world economy and insufficient state capacity on the ground. At the beginning of the 21st century, the market is increasingly replacing the state as the primary means of allocating resources. The state has been cut to size, not only in terms of executive capacity but also in terms of mandate and the scope of its activities. It finds itself in competition for influence and under growing scrutiny from actors in the market and civil society. The result is that development is no longer the bold attempts to improve the conditions of the poor that characterised the cutting-edge thinking of 30 years ago. In fact, because of the dominance of the neo-liberal paradigm, civil society organisations see themselves increasingly in opposition not just to the state but above all to corporate capital.

With civil society enjoying recognition as the voice of the poor, it can play an important role in shaping our future views of key issues that to date have been lumped together under the broader concept of development. It is the argument of this paper that the challenge

<sup>1</sup> ‘The 1975 Dag Hammarskjöld Report on Development and International Cooperation ‘What Now: Another Development’, Special Issue prepared on the occasion of the Seventh Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly, *Development Dialogue* 1975:1/2.

facing civil society at the beginning of the 21st century is to help redress the imbalance that currently exists in the global economic system between rich and poor at the level of nations as well as citizens. How such a momentous task can be achieved is not easily defined in a paper like this, but some general reflections on the subject are offered in conclusion. In pursuing this argument, the paper begins by looking at what is wrong with development. It proceeds by examining what civil society is all about and the challenges facing it at the beginning of the 21st century. It concludes with some reflections on how civil society actors may want to proceed in the future.

### *What Went Wrong with Development?*

Development is inextricably associated with the enlightenment tradition in the Western world. It has come to reflect the assumption that humans are in control of their own destiny. They can make their own choices without awaiting the verdict of divine or supernatural powers. It is so much an integral part of Western thinking that we take it for granted. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the case of how the concept moved on to the international scene with the launching of the Marshall Plan by the United States Government in the late 1940s. A speechwriter for President Harry Truman coined the term as an indication of what was needed to bridge the gap between what he had already termed ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ countries.<sup>2</sup> It was by accident rather than design that it emerged from the subconscious to the conscious part of the Western mind and thus became part of a terminology that has dominated the international community for the past 50 years.

There are two major problems with the way the concept of development has been used ever since. The first is that it has been treated as a macro activity, with a special emphasis on economics. The other is that it has been appropriated by a relatively small group of elite actors. Development has been defined and put into practice in terms that reflect professional and managerial concerns rather than something that makes sense to the lay person.

Development is typically thought of and measured at country level. The World Bank issues its annual *World Development Report* containing data on key economic – and to a lesser extent – social indicators for each country. This exercise tends to reinforce not only the distinction between ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ (now typically



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2 Personal communication, Professor Gilbert Rist, Graduate Institute of Development Studies, Geneva.

referred to in these circles as ‘developing’) countries, but also the idea that governments are the principal actors in development. The effort by the United Nations Development Programme to issue its own report with a greater emphasis on the human dimensions of development – the *Human Development Report* – operates on the same assumptions. Other key actors such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the various bilateral and multilateral funding agencies use the same approach.

Development, therefore, tends to be reduced to the setting of specific policy goals and adopting of mechanisms to achieve them. Over the years, different perspectives on what these goals and managerial mechanisms should be have changed. In the early days, beginning in the mid-1950s when the concept was applied not only to the reconstruction of Western Europe but increasingly also to the colonies in Africa and Asia that had just been given political independence – or were about to be given it – development was exclusively about imitating the achievements of the already developed countries. The term coined to capture this perspective is the ill-fated word ‘modernisation’. It is ill fated because, in the way the concept was used, the world overlooked the fact that development is fundamentally an expression of modernity, as I shall discuss further below. Instead, the international community assumed that countries that were not yet developed could be turned around merely through the importing of capital and expertise from the outside. Modernity could be brought about by these inputs from external sources. The state was deemed to be the engine of this process. Foreign aid began to emerge as a significant resource flow from the developed to the underdeveloped countries. No one really paid attention at that time to what we now call ‘civil society’, although the poorer countries often had a rich variety of voluntary associations. The result was that these private and voluntary organisations were ignored – in some cases, banned – in favour of a comprehensive development planning process focused on state institutions only.

By 1970 it was clear to the international development agencies that had begun funding projects and programmes in Africa, Asia and Latin America that modernisation was not bearing the expected fruits. Development was redefined with a greater emphasis on the poor and especially the idea that ‘developing people’ is important. As suggested above, this resulted in massive investments in primary health care and primary school education. Adult literacy was also included. The problem with this approach was that government politicians and administrators defined for the people what their needs were. There was no serious effort to involve the people and make

them conscious of what they might be able to do on their own. They were spoken to, but never listened to. The state continued to be the principal actor in development, although efforts were made in many countries to ‘bring the government closer to the people’. This idea was translated into various forms of deconcentration of authority to lower echelons in the government hierarchy. The 1970s represents the peak of state-directed planning and development. It became increasingly clear that the state alone could not cope with the increased demands for development.

The way in which development was redefined in the 1980s and 1990s must be understood against the background sketched above. The rise of neo-liberalism in the early 1980s has many sources, but in the development context it was justified by the international development agencies as a response to the failure of two decades of state-driven and state-managed efforts. This new perspective brought in first the market and later civil society. The idea that the market is a more effective – and efficient – mechanism for allocating resources than the state was most coherently and powerfully presented in the special report that the World Bank issued for sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>3</sup> This report, which in fact had been commissioned by Africa’s own representatives on the Bank’s Board of Directors, made a strong case for ‘rolling back’ the state in the interest of private and voluntary initiatives. It also pointed to the poor quality of public services, leading people to disengage from rather than engage with the state. It was not as if ordinary people in developing countries needed the World Bank to tell them about the deteriorating state of affairs of their public institutions. They knew it only too well from their own experience of interacting with government. Faced with deteriorating services, people had already begun to explore alternatives on their own. ‘Grass-roots’ organisations began to emerge in both rural and urban settings, focused on solving problems at the local level, which government institutions had failed to take care of. The informal sector ‘took off with a bang’ and resulted in a number of new organisations made up of self-employed persons from the shanties of the big cities. In the countryside, government dispensaries and hospitals had ceased to offer reliable services and in many countries there was a return to traditional healers and other customary practices such as traditional birth attendance. Much of what Schumacher had articulated in the 1970s as ‘small is beautiful’ came to fruition in the subsequent decade. What happened in the 1980s was a gradual rise of associations and groups that constitute the foundation on which civil society could emerge. The



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3 *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa*, World Bank, Washington D.C., 1981.

concept of civil society itself, however, was still not a mainstream notion. Its rise to prominence came in the 1990s.

The last ten years or so has seen yet another shift in perspective on development. Less dramatic than those that took place earlier, this nonetheless should be registered as an important one. While the emphasis in the 1980s had been on economic reform in the name of financial stabilisation and structural adjustment, the efforts of the international development agencies in the 1990s focused on issues of governance. It was no longer just a matter of ‘getting prices right’ but also of ‘getting politics right’. The new perspective called for respect for institutional diversity and a recognition that while small may be beautiful, it is also vulnerable. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were identified as appropriate intermediaries between the grassroots and the summit, between micro-level efforts to make progress, on the one hand, and government development policy, on the other. Over the years, a bewildering range of NGOs competing for attention and resources has filled this space. Some are purely secular, but many others are faith-based or associated with some of the major Christian denominations including. Most importantly, however, a range of new social movements, all of which challenge the benefits that economists associate with globalisation, have emerged. This growing institutional pluralism poses a challenge to many national governments in developing countries, which continue to believe that they alone should be responsible for improving the living conditions of their citizens. The role that civil society should play, therefore, is being increasingly contested both at national and international levels.

The increasing political engagement by certain NGOs stems largely from the fact that development keeps increasing the gap between the rich and the poor. Neo-liberal economic policies in the past two decades have opened up new opportunities for many actors, but the underlying structures of the global economy have become more and more skewed in favour of those who are already rich. The fact that control of the resource flows is now in the hands of private corporations rather than public agencies has exacerbated the sense of frustration among civil society actors who find the poor and vulnerable groups in society abandoned by public bodies. According to some analysts, even the emergence and use of ‘sustainable development’ in the international development discourse has largely had the effect of blocking out the real contradictions in the present global economic order.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Chatterjee, P., and Finger, M., *The Earth Brokers: Power, Politics and World Development*, Routledge, London, 1994.

This takes us to the second problem with development – its appropriation by a professional and managerial elite. In the Western world, development is a highly specialised articulation of the basic assumptions underlying the human engineering of change. Each profession has become an increasingly specialised domain, with little or no interaction with other professional groups. This is especially true of economists. They have become an increasingly closed guild relying largely on abstract concepts and econometric equations to define and measure development. The result is that development is not for the ordinary lay person. It is conceived and discussed among experts who treat it as an object rather than something that touches them subjectively. This is the criticism that Robert Chambers makes of the ‘normal professionals’ who cannot empathise with the people for whom they prescribe developmental recipes.<sup>5</sup> The professionalisation of development, in conjunction with its preoccupation with macro issues, has kept the concept from being translated into something meaningful to citizens at large. An increasing number of civil society organisations, including the new social movements, find themselves challenging the current mainstream perspective on how to improve the conditions of the poor.

It is definitely not just a matter of providing market incentives, nor is it the prerogative of the expert. At the same time, there is reason for civil society organisations and movements to ask the hard question of how they can best help emancipate the poor in the South when the injustices of the global economic order calls for immediate action. It is one thing to speak on behalf of the poor, another to emancipate them so that they can become actors capable of taking charge of their own destiny. It is hard to see how the latter can be done without also bringing the poor in the South into a mind-frame that reflects, at least in a fundamental sense, the instrumentalist orientation associated with the Enlightenment tradition.<sup>6</sup> Whether one speaks of redressing poverty or social injustices, the poor, regardless of category, can hardly become independent actors contributing to the realisation of these objectives without acquiring the same set of modernist qualities that leaders of civil society organisations and movements already have but rarely acknowledge as the reason why they are capable of challenging establishment institutions. In other words, while there is little doubt in the current economic and political circumstances that

5 Chambers, R., *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, Longman, London, 1983.

6 For a discussion of the relationship between modernity and development, see Giddens, Anthony, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford University Press, 1991.

civil society has the potential of serving as the engine for change in the same way as the state did some 30 years ago, critiquing corporate capital, the World Economic Forum and other similar global establishment institutions is only one aspect of that role. In fact, it is the easier one. It is much more difficult to make the poor part of a solidarity movement, in which they are not just pawns but autonomous actors capable of treating time and space in the same universalist way as elites do, whether they are in government or civil society organisations.

### *What is Civil Society?*

This may sound like a superfluous question, but the truth is that most people find it hard to agree on what the concept really stands for. It is worthwhile, therefore, making an effort to define the concept and discuss its meaning.



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Although civil society is a relative newcomer to the international development lexicon – it was not even mentioned once in the *What Now* report – it is, of course, a concept that has been around for a long time. In fact, it has a very prestigious pedigree. Its rise coincides with the rise of capitalism and the evolution of the modern state in the Weberian sense of rational-legal structures of governance. Steeped in the Western philosophical tradition, civil society has four distinct roots.

One is associated with John Locke – and by extension with Hobbes – which emphasises the need for a state to restrain conflict between individuals in society. Locke's most important contribution is his emphasis on the need to limit the sovereignty of the state in order to preserve individual freedoms derived from natural law. Thus, there must be a social contract between rulers and ruled that respects the natural rights of individuals but also allows the state to protect society from destructive conflict.

Another root is associated with Thomas Paine and the Scottish Enlightenment. He and his colleagues argued that society becomes civil as commerce and manufacturing expands through the division of labour. As the state expands to provide order and reduce conflict, it may threaten the very liberties that make civil society flourish. In their libertarian perspective, a civil society develops only when individuals are able freely to exercise their natural rights. It is the market rather than the state that provides the best opportunity for the growth of civil society, because the limits on the personal capacity to satisfy individual desires can only be transcended by commercial exchanges.

The third root is linked to Alexis de Tocqueville. He was alarmed not only by the prospect of a powerful state but also by the prospect of the tyranny of the majority. He treated associations as the most effective bulwark against this double threat to individual citizens. He saw self-governing associations as being able to mediate the popular will and thereby provide the basis for stable self-governance. Such a civil society also educates the citizenry and scrutinises state actions. It facilitates distribution of power and provides mechanisms for direct citizen participation in public affairs.

The fourth link is with Georg Hegel and, by extension, with Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci. Hegel broke with the tradition of viewing civil society as a natural phenomenon. Instead, he regards it as a product of specific historical processes. He recognises that division of labour creates stratification in society and that it increases conflict between strata. Civil society, in his view, is made up of the various associations, corporations and estates that exist among the strata. The form and nature of the state is the result of the way civil society is represented. The latter, therefore, stands between citizens and a legislature, which mediates their interests with the state. The conflicts that these processes engender within civil society will lead to its destruction in the absence of a strong state. In Hegel's 'organic' perspective, the state exists to protect common interests, as it defines them, by intervening in the activities of civil society.

Marx picks up on this idea when suggesting that in capitalist systems civil society is associated with the bourgeoisie. Marx assumed that civil society, therefore, was a captive of prevailing economic structures and could not by itself change these. A revolution that transcended the civic boundaries of civil society was required for such a project. Gramsci, the most prominent Marxist analyst of civil society, bypasses the economic determinism of his intellectual mentor by arguing that associations are the mechanisms for exercising control in society. They are independent actors and should not be overlooked as mechanisms for changing the conditions of workers and peasants in society. The power that the dominant class has over others can be overturned through the development of counter-hegemonic associations that represent alternative norms for how to develop society.

The point that I am trying to make with this quick review of the philosophical contributions to the definitions of civil society is that they all reflect the simultaneous growth of state, market and society and how relations among them should be organised. Using the terminology referred to in the context of *What Now*, the Prince, Merchant

and Citizen engaged each other in those days in social and political struggles to define the nature of modern society and, by extension, development as we think of it today.<sup>7</sup> Gramsci, as much as any of the other thinkers, saw civil society in a modernist perspective.



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This brief overview of the Western roots of the civil society concept is enough to show why there may be difficulties once we wish to extend its use to societies where this tradition is absent or fledgling. Is it something other than a ‘black box’ in which all organisations – and movements – that are non-governmental belong? If so, how far should a civil society be a reflection of the values with which it is associated in the Western tradition? These are important questions because they bear on how the objectives of both good governance and halting the process of globalisation are perceived.

Beginning with the more conventional perspective on civil society, one significant debate has centred on the role of social capital. Some analysts may dislike this concept because of its affiliation with economic thought, but the point is that social capital has become current in the ongoing development discourse and like other popular concepts it must be subject to critical analysis.

Social capital generally refers to the generation and nurturing of trust and reciprocity. There is reasonably broad agreement about this basic definition. The common assumption associated with the concept is that it produces positive outcomes for society. The prescription, therefore, tends to be: the more the better! Social capital, however, comes in different forms and currencies. Some of it is short term, some long term. Some of it is inclusive, some exclusive. Putnam has taken a first step towards identifying variations within the concept when he makes the distinction between ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ forms of social capital.<sup>8</sup> The former is usually treated as the ‘ideal type’ because it fosters civic virtues by cutting across the boundaries of primary social organisation such as family, clan, tribe or race. By being crosscutting, it also helps integrate groups into society and enables them to turn conflicts into positive-sum games. Bonding refers to social capital formed in groups where personal ties are strong and there is a sense of community based on ‘us’ sharing the same background. In other words, this is social capital that

<sup>7</sup> *Development Dialogue* 1975:1/2, *op. cit.* See also Burbidge, J. (ed.), *Beyond Prince and Merchant: Citizen Participation and the Rise of Civil Society*, Pact Publications, New York, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Putnam, R., *Bowling Alone: The Decline of Social Capital in America*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2001.

is generated within primary forms of social organisation, as those listed above.

I believe that Putnam's categories of social capital are too broad and overlook other types that are equally important. One other type I label 'blinding' because it tends to be exclusivist; it is not about people wanting to be together because they share the same family, clan or ethnic background, but about people sharing a common principle and refusing to budge from it. This form of social capital arises within groups as they encounter others in the public arena. Such groups typically do not care what others think of them. Examples would be anti-abortion and militia groups in the United States and terrorist networks operating in various parts of the world. There is always a danger that a group, in its ambition to make a difference, becomes so confident in its own role that it ignores self-reflection and self-examination; hence, the existence of blinding social capital.

Another type of social capital is 'binding'. This is an expedient and short-term form that is needed to bring groups and individuals together because the challenge they face is beyond what they can do on their own. Examples would be coalitions or alliances among groups to solve a problem or fight a common enemy or threat. This type of cooperation generates a form of social capital that may be tactical in nature. It is important in civil society contexts where there is such a multitude of different organisations and where effectiveness therefore often necessitates tactical thinking.

This repertoire of social capital is important to bear in mind because it reminds us that social capital comes in several different forms. The dominant usage of the concept in international development agencies refers to the creation of civic values reflecting the civil society definition of John Locke and Alexis de Tocqueville. There is an increasing number of actors in the global arena, however, who feel constrained by this mainstream usage of the concept of civil society and the indicators adopted to measure it, such as those used in the Freedom House Index. These critics recognise that activism may sometimes involve breaking the law to make a point of protest. In many global as well as national contexts, incremental approaches to change are no longer perceived as enough because of the deepening sense of frustration with the way the global economic system produces negative outcomes for the majority of the world's population. The world looks too unjust to merit a 'business-as-usual' approach to change. Only a more radical solution is meaningful to these actors. The 'system' needs to be overhauled. This section of civil society often expresses



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a stubborn opposition to globalisation. It is no exaggeration to claim that civil society is being radicalised today and we can expect it to be that way as long as the neo-liberal dogma enjoys hegemonic status. Gramsci's notion of the need to create a counter-hegemony to the dominant neo-liberal paradigm provides a more transformative perspective of what civil society may want to contemplate as its next set of challenges.

### *Challenges Facing Civil Society*

This set of challenges cannot easily be defined for each individual organisation or movement. They will know what circumstances call for in their particular instance. Yet, it might be helpful to identify a few common issues that organisations and movements in civil society are likely to encounter. I believe that the following five issues are sufficiently general that they will form part of any actor's thinking about the future: (a) established versus new sites of action, (b) reactive versus proactive approaches, (c) global versus local action, (d) foundational versus fundamentalist thinking, and (e) single versus multiple voices.

#### *(a) Established versus new sites of action*

Civil society actors typically have two general objectives in mind. One is to influence policy and to that effect it is often necessary to lobby elected officials and government ministers who are likely to be the ultimate arbiters of what is being decided on a given issue. A second objective is to work towards changing the existing power structure in ways that enable groups that have hitherto been marginal to exert a greater influence on what is happening in society. This typically means challenging structures and institutions that are established. It is a more radical agenda that is pursued outside the parliamentary arena.

This issue is important for civil society actors at both the global and national level. For instance, there is an ongoing debate in those circles whether the international forums provided under the auspices of the United Nations are meaningful sites for pursuing the objectives of peace, social justice and environmental conservation. Too many organisations that have participated in such events in recent years are frustrated by the way in which key recommendations for effective action have been watered down by government and UN officials. Many now see the World Social Forum, initiated a few years ago by activists in Brazil, as an alternative and more hospitable site for reaching agreement on what civil society actors need to do. While this forum may have the potential to generate solidarity in the ranks of civil society, there are also costs associated with such a strategy that must be contemplated. The first is that civil society may lose leverage by dis-

associating itself from the mainstream. The second is that an expanded World Social Forum may lead to potential complications that generate antagonism instead of solidarity. The answer in each individual case may be that the organisation or movement needs to pursue a strategy for both established and new sites. Nonetheless, civil society actors will be increasingly faced with the task of agreeing on a *modus operandi* in relation to this issue.

### (b) Reactive versus proactive approaches

In an increasingly globalised world dominated by powerful private corporations that operate in many different countries and a unipolar political setting where the United States can act unilaterally, as it did in the case of Iraq, civil society must constantly be on its guard. It has to monitor scientific and technological advances, many of which may have adverse consequences not only for individual categories of vulnerable people but also for the existing power structures at large. The work of the ETC Group in Canada illustrates how a small group of activists with good information and smart thinking can make a difference in various international contexts where scientific and technological advances are being assessed for policy.<sup>9</sup> Greenpeace is another organisation that has proved effective in calling into question the effects of science and technology on public spaces or on the lives of marginalised groups of people. Keck and Sikkink have shown that advocacy networks of NGOs can overcome the deliberate suppression of information sustaining abuses of power. Reactions to initiatives taken by corporate or government actors, therefore, can reframe international and domestic debate, change the terms, sites, and configurations of participants and lead to new ideas, norms and identities.<sup>10</sup> Monitoring and auditing what happens at the frontiers of science is not easy but should be a priority for civil society given that so much power is already in the hands of a few gigantic actors.

At the same time, civil society must not forget its own roots among poor and vulnerable people. As suggested above, no other type of actors will be able to take on the challenges of emancipating the poor and the vulnerable in ways that enable them to stand on their own feet in the future. This is a proactive task that calls for an empathetic



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9 Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration (formerly Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI)); see especially the contribution by Pat Mooney in *Development Dialogue*, 1999:1-2, entitled 'The ETC Century: Erosion, Technological Transformation and Corporate Concentration in the 21st Century'.

10 Keck, M. E., and Sikkink, K., *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1998.

approach that goes beyond organising protests. It involves making the poor and vulnerable capable of reflecting on their own circumstances in ways that liberate them from dependency on the ideas of others, including sometimes those of their own ‘liberators’. This is perhaps the greatest challenge facing many civil society actors, not least those who are most anxious to see a new world order. The reactive concerns can easily overwhelm the proactive ones. It is easy for the elites in civil society to choose the route or participation in global forums rather than dirtying their fingers at the grassroots.

### (c) Global versus local action

In spite of the growing importance that global issues play in the minds of civil society actors today, much of what NGOs have done in recent years reflects the motto: ‘Think globally, act locally’. The idea of strategising on a global level in order to be more effective in specific local contexts has been important in spreading action against locally harmful interventions by other actors, be they governments or corporations. It has also allowed organisations to disseminate the same kind of methodology to different outlying areas of the periphery. This approach, however, also has its own downsides. In some respects, it is similar to the top-down approaches of yesteryear, when thinking and doing, planning and implementation were treated as separate. It has also reinforced the dominance of elitist thinking in the ranks of progressive organisations referred to above.

There is good reason, therefore, to think of the reverse: ‘Think locally, act globally’. Much of what needs to be done requires sensitivity to context. Local know-how and local institutions are often more effective in getting things done. Thinking locally, therefore, implies two important things. The first is the incorporation of local insights into the problem-solving process. The idea of a science of sustainability, promoted by an increasing number of scientists interested in conservation and development issues, is an illustration of what can be done. Sustainability scientists emphasise the need for an integrated science that brings different disciplines together as well as drawing on local knowledge that relates to scientifically defined problems. This strategy is also compatible with the idea that local experience needs to be not just scaled ‘up’ or ‘out’, as the terminology goes these days. It is not just a matter of borrowing ‘best practices’ from different local contexts and integrating them in new programmes or projects elsewhere. Thinking locally and acting globally also involves empowerment of local actors so that they can perform in contexts outside their local community. Empowerment here means not just, for example, bringing more women into legislative bodies or other public

forums, but the enabling of people who do not yet reap the benefits of modernity to do so. It is this kind of approach that broadens the base for collective action focusing on solving local problems but also making a contribution at the national – or global – level.

#### (d) Foundational versus fundamentalist thinking

Globalisation has brought peoples and countries closer together in economic but not necessarily cultural terms. Closer interaction in the marketplace tends to exacerbate cultural differences. It is no coincidence that there has been an upsurge in fundamentalist thinking as a result of the closer integration of the world, for which neo-liberal economics and advanced information technology have been responsible. The question that inevitably arises is whether we have enough in common to communicate effectively with each other. Are we about to lose the foundation on which development has rested in former generations?

This is a pertinent question at this point in time and is particularly important for civil society. Globalisation, including the rapid technological advances that we witness today, makes life less rather than more certain. We may reduce some risks, but we are creating others, often greater ones. This process inevitably raises fundamental issues that some groups immediately turn into fundamentalist causes. At the root of the Al-Qaeda phenomenon is the reaction that there is something fundamentally wrong with Western values. This is the problem with the ‘blinding’ form of social capital, discussed above. Instead of building bridges or even networks and alliances, these groups operate on their own, or only cooperate with other like-minded fundamentalist groups.

Civil society cannot completely rid itself of such organisations. They will always be there. But those organisations that believe in a common foundation – however the actors define it – have an important role to play in ensuring that the divisions that fundamentalism brings to society do not prevail. I believe that there are three ingredients in foundational thinking that are important to safeguard. The first is the idea that an alternative vision from the currently prevailing one is inevitably associated with a return to core values that have been marginalised in the period of neo-liberal economics. The pendulum has swung away from the concern with social and economic rights that was outlined in the *What Now* report of 1975. The time has come to bring them back in. The second ingredient is that what divides us is at bottom material things, not culture. By focusing on political economy rather than political culture, there is a possibility of resolving cleavages and differences in a ‘win-win’ manner. The third is the assumption that instrumental



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rationality counts. The idea that everything can be disaggregated into combinations of ends and means provides the basis for reasoned dialogue and debate. With these factors in place, it seems that foundational thinking can prevail over fundamentalism.

#### (e) Single versus multiple voices

Civil society is far from being a monolithic entity. It is a bewildering mix of organisations that vary in at least two important respects: their normative and sectoral orientation. Thus, it is no surprise that civil society is divided along such lines. In fact, some observers consider this to be an advantage, even a source of strength. Diversity and pluralism foster not only competition but also a stronger focus on specific policy issues.

There are two types of circumstances when a united voice seems particularly justified. One is when the standards of justice and fairness are so grossly violated that civil society actors have a moral responsibility to speak with one voice. The war in Iraq has come closest in recent years to constituting such an event. It was suggested in the *New York Times* in that context that world public opinion constitutes a ‘second superpower’.<sup>11</sup> The second circumstance when a single voice is warranted concerns the way in which civil society as a collective entity works. The more organisations within civil society agree on a code of conduct, the more difficult it is for other actors to criticise them. The more that civil society can govern itself, the greater the likelihood that it will be taken seriously by others.

With regard to specific policy issues and the relationship to other actors, there is bound to be great variety, and organisations cannot – nor should they – be expected to speak with one voice. Although there is strength in numbers, the problems that society faces and that organisations tackle are sufficiently specific for flexibility and multiple voices to be a source of strength rather than weakness. Civil society organisations represent different constituencies and interests and they cannot ignore their relations of accountability to either members or the public at large. What might be expected is that different sectoral groups and organisations keep each other abreast about what they are doing so that no one comes across – intentionally or not – as trying to control the agenda at the expense of others. Unfortunately, that happens all too often at both national and global levels and is a major reason why civil society gets bogged down in internal strife rather than standing up to giant corporations or powerful governments. Leaving ideology and sectoral interests aside is sometimes necessary, at least

<sup>11</sup> Tyler, P., ‘A New Power In the Streets’, *New York Times*, 17 February 2003.

from a tactical perspective, to avoid misunderstandings and conflict within civil society itself.

### *Civil Society: How Next?*

As suggested above, one of the ultimate objectives of civil society is to shift power relations in favour of the poor and vulnerable. This means that it must get ready to play an even greater role in the future. How it would play this role cannot easily be summarised in a single overview paper such as this. What I am attempting here is more modest, yet still ambitious: the provision of a ‘map’ for how to think about enhancing the collective strength of civil society. It is not written in stone. Its purpose is primarily that of encouraging debate among civil society actors on how to go about their business in the future.

The conceptual inspiration for my mapping of a comprehensive way of looking at the ‘how’ question is Albert Hirschman’s discussion of ‘exit’, ‘voice’, and ‘loyalty’.<sup>12</sup> According to Hirschman, each of these describes the way that we behave in the marketplace. This can also be applied to how we behave in the public or political arena. ‘Voice’ refers to the expression of opinion in the public through various methods, be it informing people, lobbying or advocacy. ‘Exit’ refers to the withdrawal of support, something that may be necessary if there is no agreement, if one actor ignores the opinion of others, or there is moral outrage over actions taken by a government or a



*Leaving ideology and sectoral interests aside is sometimes necessary, at least from a tactical perspective, to avoid misunderstandings and conflict within civil society itself.*

12 Hirschman, A., *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1970.

corporation. ‘Loyalty’ refers to the strengthening of cooperation in a situation where this is necessary to defend a cause or a group of people, or to pursue a course of action on which there is fundamental agreement. It suggests that there is strength in numbers and that broad coalitions or alliances sometimes pay off.

Table 1. An overview of how to proceed next

	Voice	Exit	Loyalty
Local	<p><b>Mobilise</b></p> <p>Make people aware of their own power to bring about change</p>	<p><b>Differentiate</b></p> <p>Select people ready to act in support of the poor and vulnerable</p>	<p><b>Induce</b></p> <p>Strengthen material and moral means for collective action to support local causes</p>
National	<p><b>Lobby</b></p> <p>Exercise influence on elected officials and government leaders</p>	<p><b>Oppose</b></p> <p>Manifest criticism more intensively to gain visibility</p>	<p><b>Organise</b></p> <p>Take advantage of public awareness to create membership organisations</p>
Global	<p><b>Advocate</b></p> <p>Speak on behalf of the poor in forums where they cannot be heard</p>	<p><b>Withdraw</b></p> <p>Embarrass powerful actors by withdrawing support on key issues</p>	<p><b>Network</b></p> <p>Lay foundation for strong global action by sharing information with others</p>

There is much more that could be said in each box above, but the purpose is to indicate, based on experience to date, what seem to be the key concerns at each level. The table stresses the importance of keeping in touch and collaborating on issues that affect the strength of civil society as a collective entity. It also suggests that civil society actors must be strategic in the way that they think about their own activities. For instance, when using their ‘voice’, it is important that they do so in ways that are credible, reflecting good preparation or ‘homework’, and based on a sense of comparative advantage; they may then have a powerful effect on the minds of those to whom their action matters. Similarly, it is important that the ‘exit’ option is used sparingly and only in situations where it is clear that such an approach makes a difference. This means that the approach is likely to be useful only when civil society or its individual actors has some clout. Finally, when playing the ‘loyalty’ card, actors must be sure that there is a good chance of success in upholding support for a particular cause

or winning new converts to it. Failing to hold an alliance together or being unsuccessful in recruiting wider support can be costly for individual actors as well as civil society at large.

It may be helpful to conclude this paper with suggestions of relevance to both actors and analysts of civil society. Experience to date seems to indicate that the following three propositions are potential guides for both future action and future research:

1. The higher the level of action, the louder the voice must be.

The assumption here is that work at the local level can be conducted very much outside the limelight of public media. Working with villagers, for instance, is aimed at their minds. It is a very quiet activity. At national – and even more so at global – level, however, much more attention needs to be paid to how the media can highlight and vocalise the opinion of civil society and its actors. Therefore, the higher the level of action, the more a media strategy becomes crucial.

2. The higher the level, the more spectacular the action must be.

The premise is that being able to attract attention at the local level is typically not an issue. People are likely to be curious and often ready to welcome representatives of civil society. At higher levels, however, there is much more competition for attention. Any activity must catch the eye of others, especially those for whom the activity matters. That is why it is always important to identify comparative advantage and choose a delivery strategy that makes an impact on the minds of people.

3. The higher the level, the greater the tolerance of others.

The assumption is that each organisation may find it quite easy to pursue its own work at the local level without having to worry much about others. At higher levels, however, it is necessary to acknowledge the presence of others and their opinions. Without it, civil society will remain divided, and its influence and power will accordingly be diminished.



*Civil society has every reason to continue to be a critical voice on the global policy stage, but its legitimacy will remain strong only as long as it is also self-critical and ready to deal with its own weaknesses as they arise.*

## Conclusions

Civil society occupies a position on the global policy stage that it has never had before. There is no reason to assume that it will lose its influence in the years to come. This is especially true if it can nurture its own internal growth. The challenges to this growth lie in the relations with other actors – corporate and governmental – as well as in the relations to the masses of people who rely on the ability of civil society actors to make their life and circumstances better. Civil society has every reason to continue to be a critical voice on the global policy stage, but its legitimacy will remain strong only as long as it is also self-critical and ready to deal with its own weaknesses as they arise. This may not sound like a big issue, but it often is, because members of civil society are typically better at activism than analysis. They rarely give themselves time to reflect on their own experiences. The best organisations in civil society are precisely those that build analysis into their work; that take time to learn from past experiences. If organisations don't have the expertise themselves to conduct exercises concerned with reflection and self-analysis, they should hire such expertise and use it on a regular basis. Compared to governments and corporations, it is in this very area that civil society is weak. If it wants to compete more effectively, it is clear that its member organisations must acquire and nurture analytical expertise.




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**Göran Hydén** is Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida, USA. Since the early 1960s, he has carried out research related to politics and development primarily on Africa South of the Sahara. He has been a Lecturer and Senior Lecturer at the University of Nairobi, the University of Dar es Salaam as well as at the Makerere University, Uganda. Göran Hydén has headed the Ford Foundation office in Nairobi, acted as President of the African Studies Association in the United States and has carried out consultancy work for numerous development agencies and UN organisations. His latest book is *Making Sense of Governance: Empirical Evidence from Sixteen Developing Countries* (co-authored with Julius Court and Kenneth Mease, 2004).

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