

# Civil society and democracy

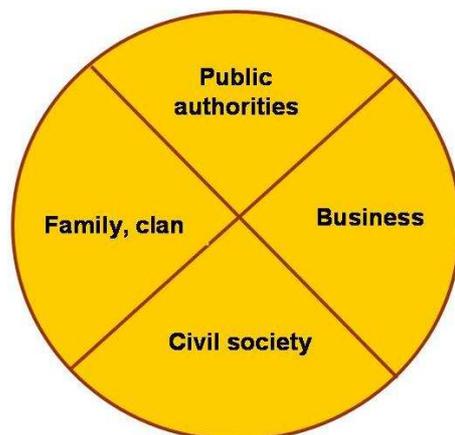
It is a common view – shared for instance by the Swedish International Development Authority, SIDA – that a strong civil society is essential for a country's democratic development.<sup>1</sup> A model in which civil society is one of four sectors is used below to consider three reasons why the civil sector is important for democracy:

- the civil sector is an arena for independent organisations
- it generates confidence
- it is an arena for democratic processes

We find that the civil sector's main contribution to a democratic development comes from promoting a civic attitude to power and responsibility.

## The civil sector – an arena for independent organisations

Depending on its function, any social group – from permanent organisations to fluid networks – can be assigned to one of the following four sectors of society:



- public authorities implement political decisions and provide public services
- the corporate sector produces goods and services for the other sectors
- the family is the primary social unit for consumption and reproduction
- civil society's organisations and networks are formally independent of the organisations in the other sectors and pursue their own ends

The dividing lines between the sectors can be rather fluid in practice. One example is a commercial book publisher that is wholly owned by a voluntary association; the publisher will belong to the corporate sector and the association to the civil sector. Decisions in one sector will then affect what happens in the other sector. Another example is a political party: as an organisation run by its members and mainly devoted to appointing candidates and campaigning to get them elected, it belongs to the civil sector; but if the party wins the election and staffs ministries and agencies with its members, it will be closer to the public authorities.

These demarcation issues illuminate and also problematise what many see as most typical of civil society: independent organisations that keep an eye on public authorities.

Over the years, the struggle to establish independent organisations has often been the decisive step towards FD government; examples are Solidarity, the Polish trade-union organisation in the 1970s and '80s, and Sweden's independent popular movements in the

late 19th century. The emergence of a strong civil society in this sense has propelled many countries on to a national FD government.

Many authorities and organisations engaged in international cooperation try to promote such a development in other parts of the world. This raises a question: How can public authorities support independent organisations without also making the latter dependent? Taking this dilemma seriously is the first step towards a solution.

## The civil sector – an arena for generating confidence

The notion of civil society as an arena for generating confidence caught on with Robert D. Putnam's empirical studies.<sup>2</sup> The argument, briefly, is that people who meet and spend time together develop mutual ties that create confidence and cohesion – a social capital. Believing that others are prepared to cooperate makes you more prepared to cooperate, too. This social capital promotes democracy and can be utilised for economic development. Conversely, if many of the civil sector's organisations lose a large proportion of their members – as happened in the closing decades of the 20th century in many developed countries, the United States in particular – there will be growing uncertainty, isolation and suspicion of strangers. Social capital is reduced.

### Some questions

Putnam's studies and conclusions have influenced development strategies in many countries. At the same time, there is a lively debate about the nature of the relationship between a strong civil society and a viable democracy.

Here are two examples:

- Which way does the relationship go? By international standards, Swedes' confidence in their public authorities, for instance, is strong, while their confidence in representative government is much weaker. This suggests that the key factor is the *authorities*. If they function reasonably well and abide by the law, the accumulation of social capital will be stimulated.<sup>3</sup>
- Some organisations – Hell's Angels, for example – erode social capital; do they still belong to civil society? Yes, as long as they are fairly independent of the other sectors. Hell's Angels may be very hierarchic, with strong leaders who dominate their subordinates, but it is still an independent organisation that aims to promote a certain lifestyle and serves as a model for many other gangs with a criminal profile. At the same time, these groups cultivate a strong internal *loyalty*. However, this bonding capital also tends to destroy the bridging capital which encourages disparate groups and social classes to co-exist peacefully and enables people to put up with those who have different opinions.

This counter-example raises a policy issue: mustn't the civil sector's organisations be fairly democratic, as measured by the Lifebuoy, if they are to contribute to a democratic development of society and thereby merit support? Is it really sufficient that they do not engage in crime and violence?

## The civil sector – an arena for democratic processes

Decision-making by authorities and companies is usually restricted to small groups of leaders. These bodies focus on administration or profit, where values such as competence and efficiency are institutionalised. In a family, the parents are their children's guardians, both legally and mostly in everyday life. Democratic principles are therefore seldom predominant in these sectors. In the civil sector, on the other hand, people are free to get together for their own purposes. If they regard each other as equal and autonomous individuals, they are also free to choose a democratic form of rule for their association.

Free, not forced. Just how common fairly democratic processes are in the civil sector is an open question. Aims can often be achieved with considerably less trouble by collaborating in more anarchic networks.

### The democratic process – an exercise in tolerance

Ask people what they appreciate most about democracy and you are likely to hear that it is participation and involvement.<sup>4</sup> And a perceived sense of community is indeed necessary for the exercise in tolerance that a democratic process may at times provide.

Most people who have been active in an association have experienced the need to adapt, to give way on certain matters and to make allowance for difficult people. They can tell of occasions when a consensus could not be achieved however hard they tried; and of how, when the only solution was to take a vote, they found themselves on the losing side.

Such trials and tribulations can be avoided in a network where no joint and binding decisions are taken. They can also be avoided in an association by fudging democracy's principles and leaving it to a strong leader to decide whose interests are to have precedence. Both alternatives dodge the personal challenge that faces those who take part in a democratic process: learning to accept that one may have to give way to other people.

### Open membership

A related aspect of civil society as a democratic arena is open membership. A closed organisation – that stipulates its own conditions for accepting new members or requires employees to possess certain qualifications – is bound to discriminate in one way or another. An organisation that is open to everyone who shares its aims could not be more inclusive if it also pays equal consideration to every member's interests. Anyone can become a member and is *free to decide the extent of his or her commitment*: they can choose to take an active part or let themselves be represented by an elected committee with a composition and policy they can influence as full members at general meetings.

This aspect of representation is often overlooked but it is what makes an organisation a legitimate spokesman for a civic interest, great or small, depending on the number of members. This is bad news for networking activists who readily equate their concerns with the best interests of society. But whom do they represent apart from themselves? Their aims may be admirable and merit support but not on *democratic* grounds.

Taking the principle of open membership seriously has consequences for the types of organisation in the civil sector that it is suitable for a public authority to support or

cooperate with. It also faces professional development assistance organisations with a dilemma: take, for example, a development assistance foundation that is not itself an open organisation; how can it argue that the organisations it intends to support should be open?

## Power and citizenship

When a community that wants to be democratic constitutes itself, there is in principle a tacit understanding among the members that prevailing power structures – based on money, gender, education, social class or some other resource – are not to have any influence on the community's decisions. That is ultimately what the principles of *Equal consideration* and *Personal autonomy* boil down to.

This is a radical position but that does not make it utopian. There are relatively simple ways – at least at the organisational level – of doing something about deficiencies in the various phases of the democratic process. They are controversial, however. They are bound to involve a redistribution of power: some participants will have less influence than they are accustomed to, others will have more. But the fact remains: the democratic process is a game in which the egalitarian principles are trumps and at least in the civil sector there are no institutional barriers to playing those cards.

Independent organisations with open and equal membership give people a chance of exercising and sharing power with other people in matters that concern them. These civic experiences are probably the civil sector's most important contribution to a democratic social development. They also promote a civic perspective in matters that are decided at the national or international level.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Support to Civil Society*, SIDA 2007

<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, Princeton 1993, *The Lonely Bowler*, 2000

<sup>3</sup> Bo Rothstein, "Social Capital in the Social Democratic State. The Swedish Model and Civil Society", *Politics and Society* 29, 2001

<sup>4</sup> For more detail, click on *About democracy.se* at [www.democracy.se](http://www.democracy.se)