

# What is Civil Society (1) ?

## DEFINING CIVIL SOCIETY

- According to [Jan Aart Scholte](#), civil society can be understood to be a political space where voluntary associations deliberately seek to shape the rules that govern aspects of social life
- Civil society organizations target formal rules; they seek to change and/or impose social constructs or social orders
- Civil society can also encompass many sorts of actors, and it is much wider than the formal world of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)
- Civil society exists wherever and whenever voluntary associations of any kind try deliberately to shape rules that govern society, broadly defined



## THE DIVERSITY OF CIVIL SOCIETY

- Civil society operates at multiple levels or scales in contemporary politics - diverse civil society actors engage with many different types of development questions
- The capacity and/or competencies that civil society actors can claim are also incredibly diverse
- In pursuing these ends, civil society organizations adopt diverse approaches to decision-making
- As regards objectives, it is possible to argue that civil society actors can pursue either **conformist**, **reformist**, or **transformist** aspirations



Civil Society is much bigger than the world of formally constituted NGOs that seek to address these issues

## THE GLOBAL RISE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

- Many countries now report that they have officially registered tens of thousands of civil society organizations
- This expansion has occurred in part as a response to globalization: traditional state-based regulations have proven inadequate to govern 'transworld' phenomena
- Globalization has also promoted the expansion of civil society, encouraging the diversification of transboundary connections
- Widespread dissatisfaction with party politics and the actions of public officials have also contributed to the growth of civil society



UN Specialized Agencies engage intensively and extensively with civil society groups

## CIVIL SOCIETY: IMPACTS ON GOVERNANCE

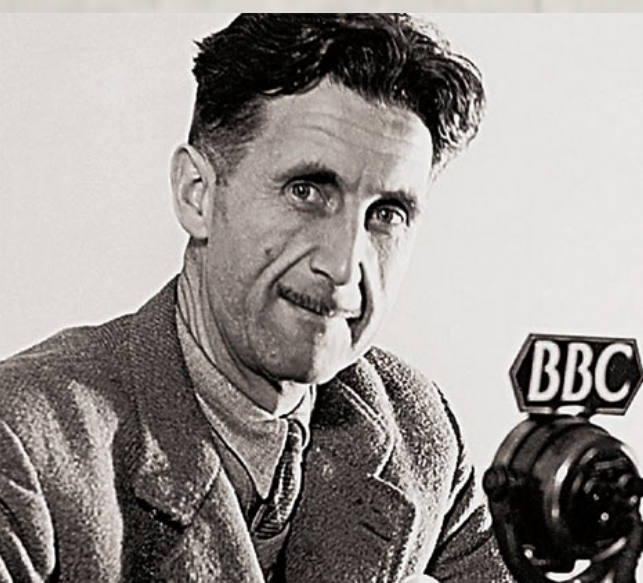
- It is hard to establish the precise influence of civil society on specific governance outcomes - each claim of civil society's causal significance requires painstaking empirical verification
- [Scholte](#) suggests it is nonetheless possible to think about civil society impacts on a case by case basis and there are four broad headings that can be used to categorize civil society impacts: (i) impacts on language; (ii) impacts on institutional processes; (iii) impacts on policy content; and (iv) impacts on broader social structures



Maude Barlow

## IMPACTS ON LANGUAGE

- The way that issues are thought about and talked about is crucial to shaping political action related to international development
- A number of key notions have achieved wide circulation in part due to their dissemination and propagation by civil society
- Given the divisions between those that pursue either conformist, reformist and transformist ends, civil society actors have simply not attempted to speak the same language or discourse on international development issues



## CIVIL SOCIETY EFFECTIVENESS?

- Civil society groups can obtain performance legitimacy through making politics more workable - for example, when they contribute to efforts to reform development institutions in substantive ways, they can claim performance legitimacy
- However, claims regarding effectiveness can be contested
- Some civil society organizations have also demonstrated considerable incompetence - civil society activity is not inherently able or wise



Effective?

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY

- Civil society activism on development might be deemed legitimate on grounds of democracy as it has widely been argued that contemporary globalization has generated large democratic deficits
- Civil society has given voice to parts of the public who would otherwise have been largely or completely excluded at the global level
- That said, some civil society associations have limited public participation and have not been interested in enabling public accountability



Democratic?

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL COHESION

- Globalization has unsettled bonds of collective solidarity through the state and the nation - civil society can fill this gap to the extent that its activities further social cohesion
- Some civil society activity has promoted mutual understanding across deep cultural divides
- However, not all civil society activity has had positive implications for social cohesion

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/people/scholte/>



Inclusive?

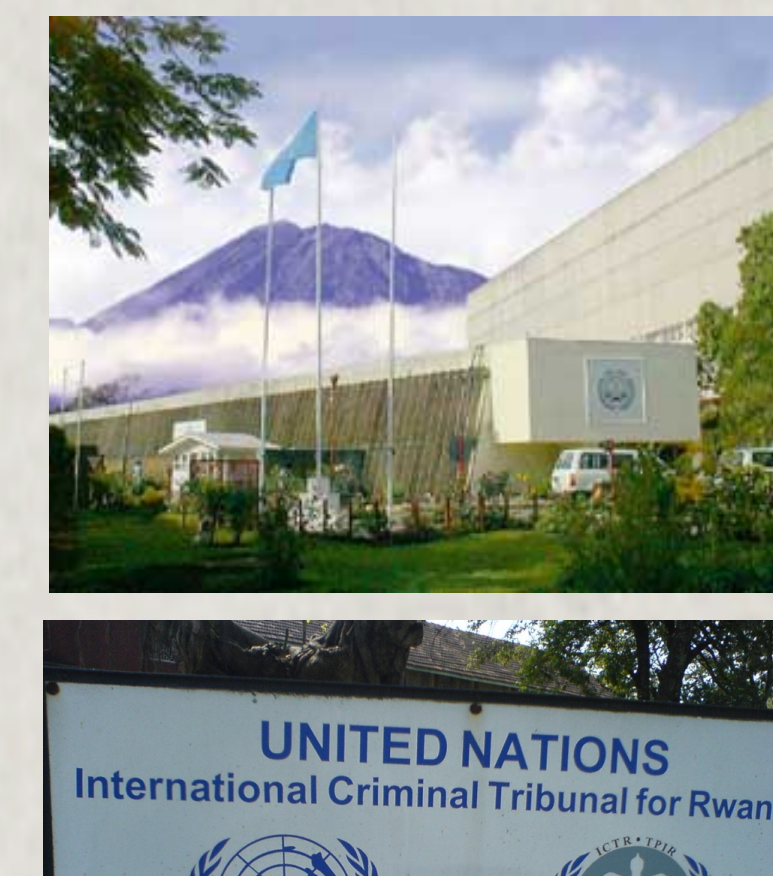
## IMPACTS ON INSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES



New civil society actors: the Clinton Global Initiative and the Gates Foundation

- Civil society has affected the procedures through which policies on global issues are made
- Many civil society actors have also become direct participants in decision-making processes at the global level - the World Bank, for example, has developed extensive civil society participation systems
- Civil society organizations have provided policy inputs and formulated new measures
- Civil society actors have also urged international development institutions to become more transparent

## IMPACTS ON THE CONTENT OF POLICIES



- Countless civil society interventions have helped to initiate, propel, amend or even block policy measures, and to create new international institutions and tribunals
- Civil society has undeniably figured centrally in the growth of the focus on environment and development since the 1970s
- Civil society has arguably also helped to re-frame macro-economic policies: through the efforts of civil society, individuals in positions of power now speak more about the need for poverty reduction and social safety nets

## IMPACTS ON DEEPER SOCIAL STRUCTURES



- Cumulative evidence suggests that civil society has affected discourses, practices and decisions that relate to international development: what about the impact of civil society actors on deeper social structures?
- It is clear that civil society has reinforced the autonomy of supra-national institutions from nation-states and helped to reconfigure communities in a transnational, transboundary era
- civil society activism has also led to greater questioning of the institutions of modernity...

## THE LEGITIMACY OF CIVIL SOCIETY



- If civil society matters, is civil society activity legitimate?
- [Jan Aart Scholte](#) suggests that civil society engagements are not inherently legitimate or illegitimate
- Scholte has articulated several criteria that can be used to assess the legitimacy of civil society activities: (i) morality; (ii) effectiveness; (iii) democracy; and (iv) social cohesion

## CIVIL SOCIETY: MORAL LEGITIMACY?



Moral?

- Civil society can secure moral legitimacy when organizations and individuals pursue noble objectives and act as a social or an ecological conscience
- While many civil society campaigns are clearly morally legitimate, there are occasionally questions about the moral legitimacy of certain civil society groups - the violent racism perpetuated by fascist civil society groups is a case of morally illegitimate civil society activism

# What is Civil Society (2) ?

Mapping out the intellectual terrain of 'civil society' and exploring a range of conceptual understandings of how it is conceived, researched, and actioned.

**Civil Society (CS)** may be defined and characterized in various ways, including in terms of:

## Actors

- (e.g., not-for-profit, voluntary, inclusive, third element beyond state and business, emerging from everyday life, knowledge producers/consumers, multi-stakeholder)

## Agendas

- (e.g., intentional, value-guardian, counterbalance to non-civil society actors, democratic, action-oriented, reciprocity, political, normative, emancipatory-self-regulating-supremacist, transformative-reformist-conformist)

## Processes

- (e.g., freely organized, freedom of expression, participatory, dialectic, networks, relationships, collective action, cooperation, self-help, service, interaction, dynamics, flexible/adaptable, critical/reflexive, fragile/resilient, historical)

## Spaces

- (e.g., grassroots, blurred boundaries, transboundary, local/global, realm of social interaction, social context)

## Outcomes

- (e.g., people enabled to fullest capacity, voices heard, social justice, better planet, enhancing everyday lives)

**But defining /characterizing civil society is an uncomfortable exercise**

Defining 'civil society' is an uncomfortable exercise given that labeling necessarily involves imposing norms and boundaries from a particular, political stance.

Perhaps it is best to not define (and instead adopt guiding principles) so as to remain inclusive, participatory, adaptable, and to avoid reproducing top-down agenda-setting and processes. It is also best not to define so as to fully acknowledge and embrace the complexity, dynamism, and multi-faceted nature of 'civil society'.

To this end, a school that engages with civil society is an important tenet to embrace such that definitions and conceptualizations emerge from engagement itself.

## Conceptual challenges

- Conceptually, some challenges with 'civil society' lie with its **scholarly baggage, manufactured history, and continued neo-colonial threads**, all of which make it a highly politicized realm.
- Further, how can we best engage with and encourage participation and genuine collaboration?
- How can we best avoid exploitation and overburdening those with whom we wish to engage and collaborate?
- How can we frame a code of ethics and normative stance that are inclusive yet reflective of shared objectives and perspectives amongst those involved?
- How do we **preserve academic freedom** amidst increasing pressures to align objectives and perspectives with 'civil society'?

The above ideas are based on May 16th 2012 convening by Alice Hovorka (Department of Geography), Belinda Leach (Associate Dean of Research, College of Social and Applied Human Sciences), Sarah Pugh (PhD Candidate, Department of Political Science). Participants included Ashlee Cunsolo-Wilcox (Department of Geography, McGill University), John Devlin (School for Environmental Design and Rural Development), Cate Dewey (Population Medicine, Ontario Veterinary College), Linda Hawkins (Institute for Community-Engaged Scholarship), Roberta Hawkins (Department of Geography), Craig Johnson (Department of Political Science), Mavis Morton (Department of Sociology and Anthropology), Stuart McCook (Department of History), Joe Tindale (Family Relations and Applied Nutrition/Sociology/Anthropology)

# What is Civil Society (3) ?

The World Bank has adopted a **definition of civil society** developed by a number of leading research centers:

“the term civil society to refer to the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) therefore refer to a wide of array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations”.

The World Bank (August, 2010). Defining civil society. Retrieved from: <http://go.worldbank.org/4CE7W046K0>