



CIVIL SOCIETY-ITS ROLE IN GOOD GOVERNANCE: PARTICIPATION, ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Ashwini Roy A.S, Ph. D.

*Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science GFGC, HSR Layout, Bangalore-
560102, Karnataka, India*

Abstract

For over two decades now, the process of globalization has been influencing the socio-economic environment in countries. While globalization provides new opportunities for economic development to countries through trade liberalization, foreign direct investment, capital flows, information exchange and technological transfer, it has meant increased deprivation for those nations which have been unable to adjust to the new requirement of global society. Thus on one hand while we witness rapid economic growth and prosperity in some regions, there are more than a billion people who continue to live in poverty with purchasing power of less than a dollar a day. In the poorest countries, about one fifth of the children die in the first year of their birth, nearly half of those who survive fare malnourished and a significant proportion of the population does not have access to clear water, sanitation, basic health services and education. This paper identifies the significance of Civil Society, impediments to the growth of civil society in developing countries and its role in good governance.



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

Introduction: The harsh realities of the increasing global inequalities had been a major concern to the international community over the years, but the new century opened with an unprecedented declaration of solidarity and determination to rid the world of poverty. The millennium declaration adopted at the largest ever gathering of heads of state in September 2000 committed countries-rich and poor to do all they can to eradicate poverty, promote human dignity and equality and achieve peace, democracy and environmental sustainability. World leaders promised to work together to meet the millennium development goals (MDGs) with specific targets including that of reducing poverty by half of 2015.

However fifteen years after the declaration, progress is partial. Some regions like Asia and the Pacific and some countries like China may generally be on track, but others are not. It seems that on current trends most countries will not reach many MDGs target. Achieving MDGs require a shift in development paradigm with: First, new focused and coherent

strategies which prioritize the MDGs; Second, sustained commitment and enhanced political will on the part of the world leaders and Third; new development partnership based on shared responsibilities among major stakeholders. It requires many combined and complimentary efforts by international agencies, national governments, local authorities, private sectors and civil society organizations. (CSOs). Civil Society has to make major contributions both directly and indirectly to the process reduction and attainment of other MDGs targets. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Community Organisations, Professional Associations and other civil society groups are regularly called on to help design and implement poverty reduction strategies. This participation is also built into special initiative like the global fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Significance of Civil Society Sector: Recent years have witnessed a significant upsurge of organised private, non-profit activity in countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Long recognised as provides of relief and promoter of human rights, such organizations were now increasingly viewed as critical contributors to economic growth and civic and social infrastructure essential for a minimum quality of life for the people.

Despite the growing importance, civil society in the developing world remains partially understood. Even basic descriptive information about these institutions- their number, size, area of activity, sources of revenue and policy framework within which they operate- is not available in any systematic way. For much of the recent history, social and political discourses have been dominated by the “two sector model” that acknowledges the existence of only two actors-the market (for profit private sector) and the state. This is reinforced by the statistical conventions that have kept the “third sector” of civil society organisations largely invisible in official economic statistics. As such, a comprehensive and representative understanding of the role and significance of the civil society sector continues to be a major gap in the literature, particularly in the context of developing countries.

Definition of Civil Society: The concept of civil society goes back to many centuries in western thinking with its roots in ancient Greece. The modern idea of civil society emerged in the 18th century, influenced by political theorist from Thomas Paine to George Hegel, who developed the notion of civil society as a domain parallel to but separate from the states. The 90s brought about renewed interests in civil society as the trend towards democracy opened up space for civil society and need to cover increasing gaps in social services created by structural adjustment and other reforms in developing countries.

“Civil Society is composed of autonomous associations which develop a dense, diverse and pluralist network. As it develops, civil society will consist of a range of local

groups, specialised organisations and linkages between them to amplify the corrective voices of civil society as a partner in governance and the Market” (Connor, 1990)

The key features of successful civil societies which emanate from various definitions include the following: separation from the state and the market; formed by people who have common needs, interests and values like tolerance, inclusion, cooperation and equality; and development through a fundamentally indigenous and autonomous process which cannot easily be controlled from outside. The experience of developing countries highlights a wide range of such organisation, from large registered local bodies to informal local organisations, the latter being far more numerous and less visible to outsiders. These include traditional organisations (e.g. religious organisations, and modern groups and organisations, mass movements and action groups, political parties, trade and professional organisations, non-commercial organisations and community-based organisations). Civil Society should not be equated to non-governmental organisations (NGOs). NGOs are a part of civil society though they play an important and sometimes leading role in activating citizen participation in socio-economic development and politics and in shaping or influencing policy. Civil Society is a broader concept, encompassing all organisations and associations that exist outside the state and the market.

Role of Civil Society: Civil Society has been widely recognised as an essential “third sector”. Its strength can have a positive influence on the state and the market. Civil society is therefore seen as an increasingly important agent for promoting good governance like transparency, effectiveness, openness, responsiveness and accountability. Civil Society can further good governance, first by policy analysis and advocacy; second by regulation and monitoring of state performance and the action and behaviour of public officials; third by building social capital and enabling citizens to identify and articulate their values, beliefs, civic norms and democratic practices; fourth by mobilizing particular constituencies, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized sectors of masses to participate more fully in politics and public affairs; and fifth by development work to improve the well-being of their own and other communities.

Impediments to Growth of Civil society in Developing Countries: The issue of the small scale of the civil society sector in developing countries, where their potential contribution to the achievement of MDGs is high, deserves further attention. If these organizations are to be strengthened, it is important to understand what factors have historically hindered their growth. Variation in the scale and nature of civil society sector in different countries is

largely affected by the historical, cultural, social , and political environment, a number of impediments to growth of CSOs can be identified as follows;

- **Authoritarian Political Control:** Perhaps the most basic factor accounting for the generally retarded pattern of the third sector development in many countries is the long history of authoritarian rule. In Latin America, forexample, the non-profit sector in Brazil has taken shape in the historical context characterized by a strong state and a weak civil society. Strong state control was figured prominently in the histories of Egypt and Ghana in Africa. In India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan (in South Asia) history is dominated by successive empires that rose, flourished and declined, with a hierarchical social form, with limited social organization outside the control of the state. Given this pattern of authoritarianism, little room was left for a truly independent third sector in these societies. What charitable institutions emerged therefore had to fit within the prevailing structures of political and social power and avoid posing serious challenge to the dominant political authorities. Authoritarianpolitical control did not end in these countries with independence. Rather, it persisted. The upshot has been a persistent atmosphere of distrust between the non-profit sector and the state in many of these countries. The state remains highly watchful of its power and too easily interprets the emergence of CSOs as a challenge to it very legitimacy.
- **Religion:** Religion has a multiple impact on the development of the non-profit sector. In addition to the basic creed and the support it gives to acts of charity, crucial other facets of religion's impact need to be taken into account-its posture toward individualism, its commitment to institution building, and its relationship with state authorities. Indications are that while religions can share a positive orientation toward philanthropy, they may not generally be supportive of the emergence of CSOs.
- **Colonialism:**Another factor that helps to explain the generally retarded pattern of third sector development in the third world is the recent history of colonial control. Like religion, however, colonialism's impact on this sector development has been multi-dimensional. What is more, it has varied somewhat depending on the national traditions and values of the colonial power. Colonialism has tended to undermine the independence of local social classes that might have provided the rallying point for civil society institutions.
- **Low Income and Constrained Social Development:** Perhaps, the most important impact of colonialism on some of the countries was the constraint it exercised on social development. One of the principle consequences if the colonial experience, in fact, was to limit the space that indigenou middle class elements could occupy in the developing world.

This was so because the colonial administration handled many governmental and commercial functions that might otherwise have been performed by the indigenous people, thereby restricting middle class professional opportunities.

- **Limited Resources:** An important factor hindering the growth of the civil society sector is the scarcity of financial resources. Funding constraints limit the scale and functioning of CSOs. Significantly impairing their ability to deliver and maintain services. In case of large NGOs, in particular, heavy reliance is frequently placed on funding from foreign donors. This is making CSOs more reflective of donor interests than those of their communities or designated target groups. Many CSOs have to review their missions or undertake work outside their mandate just to survive. The difficult economic conditions make local fundraising very difficult. Competition for scarce resources is also limiting opportunities for coalition-building, long-term institutional development and other aspects of local capacity building.
- **Legal Treatment:** A further factor curtailing the development of the non-profit sector in some developing countries has been the legal environment within which non-profits must operate. Certainly in civil law countries such as Brazil, Thailand and Egypt, where no basic right to organise is automatically recognized in law, formal law can shape the environment for action rather fundamentally. Reflecting the generally authoritarian politics that have characterised these countries during much of their recent history, the legal structure for civil society activity has been quite restrictive.
 - **The Development Paradigm:** One other factor helping to explain the historically constrained pattern of civil society sector development in the third world is the changing fashion in development policy and development ideology. During the 1950s and 1960s, development thinking emphasised the importance of a state as the principal agent of modernising reforms. As a consequence, considerable effort went into differentiating a sphere of state action outside the [post-modern structures of tribe or community, and into creating modern, secular administrative structures that could effectively operate in this sphere. This development framework included a sphere of business in addition to that of government, but it downplayed, if not excluded, CSOs which viewed a only marginal in the frame of affairs.

The shift to “Structural adjustment” in the 1980s did not change this fundamentally. To the contrary, the “structural adjustment” paradigm of development merely replaced government with the private business community as the mode of development. In the process, however, it

reinforced as essentially two-sector model of society that left little room for a vibrant civil society sector. The lack of civil society growth is thus understandable given that it has been historically neglected in the central policy debate.

In short the development of the third sector seems to have been inhibited by a long history of authoritarianism; by colonial heritage and a history of limited economic growth that restricted the growth of an independent middle class; by religious traditions that placed less emphasis on “modularity” and the fostering of independent institutional structure; by legal structures that often placed impediments in the way of civil society formation; and by development policies that stressed the creation of a modernizing state and later the development of private enterprise rather than the promotion of independent institutions outside the confines of the market and the state.

Role in Good Governance; Participatory, Accountability and Transparency: Good Governance has recently been accorded a central place in the discourse on development. It is being argued that without an appropriate governance structure, developing countries will not be able to either sustain economic growth or a momentum towards rapid poverty reduction. This has been the conclusion of a number of research studies trying to figure out why despite resource allocation and good policies, broad improvements in human welfare have not occurred and improvement in services, freedom from hunger, illness and illiteracy still remain elusive.

The World Development Report 2004 documents three ways in which services can be improved;

- School voucher scheme such as a program for poor families in Columbia or a girls scholarship programme in Bangladesh (that paid school based on the number of girls they enrolled) increase clients power over providers and sustainability increased enrolment rates.
- By raising poor citizen’s voice through the ballot box and making information widely available. Service delivery survey in Bangalore, India that showed poor people the quality of the water, health, education and transport services they were receiving compared to neighbouring districts increased demand for better public services and forced politicians to act.
- By rewarding the effective and penalizing the ineffective delivery of services to poor people. In the aftermath of a civil war, Cambodia paid primary health providers in two districts based on the health of the householders (as measured by independent surveys) in

their district. Health indicators as well as use by the poor in those districts improved relative to other districts.

All of the above relates to governance structure- Participation and Empowerment, Accountability and Transparency.

Framework of Accountability: Accountability is a pillar of democracy and good governance that compels the state, the private sector and civil society to focus on results, seek clear objectives, develop effective strategies and monitor and report on performance measured as objectively as possible. Transparency promotes openness of the democratic process through reporting and feedback, clear process and procedures and the conduct of actions by those holding decision-making authority. It makes information understandable and keeps clear standard accessible to citizens.

In the context of service delivery to the poor, the chain of relationship of accountability has three sets of actors: Poor people as patients in clinic, Students in school, passengers on buses, consumers of water – as clients of services; the providers of services- frontline professionals (school teachers, doctors, bus drivers, water companies) and organisation providers (health department, education department, water department); and finally the policy-makers or politicians. The relationship among actors has five features; delegation, finance performance, information about performance and enforceability. (World Development Report) In an ideal world the three sets of actors are linked in a relationship of power and accountability. Citizens exercise “Voice over Politicians”. Policy-Makers have a ”Compact” with organizational providers. Organizational providers manage frontline providers and clients exercise “Client Power” through interaction with frontline providers. Weakness in any relationship results in service failure. As the World Development Report (2004) puts it, this can be the short route of accountability. However, in most developing countries public sector involvement is likely to continue a probable service delivery scenario.

Political Accountability and Citizens’ Voice: Political Accountability means regular and open methods for sanctioning or awarding those who hold position of public trust through a system of checks and balances among the executive, legislature and judicial branches. Citizens’ voice in society and participation in politics connect them to the people who represent the state- the policy-makers and politicians. In principle, poor people as citizens contribute to defining society’s collective objectives and they try to control public action to achieve those objectives.

Accountability is the willingness of politician to justify their actions and to accept electoral, legal or administrative penalties, if the justification is found lacking. In principle, elections

provide citizens with both accountability and enforceability. In practice, democracies vary greatly on both dimensions, as do most attempts to exercise accountability.

In summary, empowering poor citizens by increasing their influence in policy-making and aligning their interest to the extent possible, with those of the non-poor can hold politicians more accountable. Elections, informed voting and other traditional voice mechanisms should be strengthened, because these processes and the information they generate can make political commitment more credible, helping to produce better service outcomes. What role can civil society play in this? CSOs can help to amplify the voices of the poor, coordinate coalitions to overcome their collective action problems, mediate on their behalf through redress mechanisms, and demand greater service accountability. It needs to be kept in mind that participatory, transparent and accountable governance does not come easy. An essential part is, therefore, social mobilisation whereby consistent through gradual effort is required to establish, organize, strengthen and empower civil society, so that they can increase in number and two, convert their numerical strength into genuine bargaining power.

References

- Human Development Report, 1993, U.N Development Programme, United Nations.*
- Human Development Report, 2003, "Millennium Development Goals: A Compact among Nations and End to Human Poverty", U.N Development Programme.*
- Rondinelli, D.A and Cheema G.S, 2003, Reinventing Government for the 21st Century: State Capacity in a Globalising Society", published by Kumarian Press, Inc.*
- UNDP 2003, "Good Practices in Asia and the Pacific, Expanding choices, Empowering People", Regional Bureau of Asia and Pacific.*
- World Development Report, 1990, "Poverty", World Development Indicators, The World Bank.*
- World Development Report, 2004; Making Services Work for Poor People, The World Bank.*