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Civil Society, Democracy and Development: International Experiences and the Ethiopian Context

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Topic: *Challenges and Opportunities for Civil Society Coalition Building in An Era of Globalisation*

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CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

Introduction

There are different definitions to the term civil society but what is unique in most definitions is that there is consensus on the fact that civil society activities are driven to benefit citizens by groups, individuals and associations. More often than not the term Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) is erroneously taken to mean civil society. Civil society involves a broad range of civic elements including trade unions, faith-based organisations, community-based organisations and associations, social movements and networks and people who participate in public discourses and activities. Over the last decade or so there has been a profound increase in the number of civic organisations with concomitant increases in their capacity, scope of influence, public profile and audiences. This proliferation of civic networks has been facilitated by the same factors that have enhanced globalisation including technological advancements and socio-cultural, economic and political integration. These processes in this era of globalisation have not been devoid of challenges for coalition building for civil society but they have also been accompanied by new opportunities.

Debating Globalisation

Globalisation has drawn the people of the world into closer proximity with one another; it has intensified contact between them, lowered many but not all types of barriers to the movement of goods, ideas, technology and cultural products and accelerated the pace at which information is shared. At the same time this move towards economic, political and cultural integration weakens the ability of

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national governments to take decisions that would be for the national interest. Local control over decision-making is rapidly shifting upwards to structures and processes that are not accountable to ordinary citizens. In this context, globalisation has accelerated profound changes in the economic, socio-cultural and political spheres.

In the economic sphere, the emergence of global markets of goods and global competition between its suppliers are facets of globalisation. On a macro economic level, the existence of the global market has assumed a hegemonic position with its main characteristics of free trade relations and reduced state expenditure, especially in the field of social services. In the global south, the dominance of neo-liberal policies of multilateral donors was turned into reality through Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPS) which tied further development aid to the implementation of strict fiscal policies by the respective governments. The failure of most SAPS and the reign of the free market ideology increase the global gap between the rich in the North and the poor in the South.

The main feature of globalisation at the socio-cultural level concerns the new opportunities of communication and information through the widespread access to mass media and the use of high technology, especially the internet. These technical developments have profound social impacts: they introduce non-hierarchical, socially non-exclusive means of communication and sources of information. More importantly, cooperation, networking and collective action that transcend national boundaries have been greatly facilitated. These global issue-specific aspects play down the importance of national identities and allegiances to territorially bound political communities and instead pave the way for what could develop into a common individual identity of global citizenship.

In the political sphere, recent global processes have led to a profound transformation in the power of the state; though not necessarily to a decline, as some Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) states continue to play a significant role in the various decision-making processes at the global level. It is important to note that those that are making the rules for global institutions like the IMF and the World Bank are national governments of the G 8. Furthermore, the increasing regional cooperation of states in such powerful institutions as

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the European Union might have led to a decline in their individual sovereignty, but to a definite gain in their common bargaining power at the global level. The current state of global politics is, characterised by a high level of hierarchical relationships and undemocratic structures.

Several challenges and opportunities have emerged for civil society coalition building within the context of a globalising world. I will start by highlighting the challenges that come from within civil society and later on mention those that come from outside civil society.

Challenges for Civil Society Coalition Building

Internal Challenges:

The first major challenge that comes from within civil society is the challenge of power and power imbalances. Civil society is vibrant and diverse, it encompasses both major transnational NGOs with multimillion dollar operating budgets and tiny citizen-based organisations with highly constrained resources, access to information and capacity. It embraces highly structured groups such as trade unions alongside loose issue-based social movements. While this diversity adds to the sectors' richness, it also throws up fundamental questions about whose voices are heard and in which venues, how resources are accessed and distributed and who exactly is represented.

A second challenge centres on the issue of bridging narrow interests and broader goals. Many civil society actors are committed to advancing a specific issue, whether this involves protecting rainforests, promoting labour practices or advancing women's rights. While recent civil society activity has been noteworthy for the alliances that have been formed among groups with different areas of interest, there remains a type of 'silo mentality' which prevents civil society organisations from working across specialised areas and toward common goals. For example dialogue between human rights organisations and development organisations has historically been weak and many potentially productive synergies have evaded us. With many human rights organisations now embracing social and economic rights and with many development organisations adopting a rights-based approach to their work, the time is right to bridge this divide. We need to create an environment where for example NGOs rise to defend workers'

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rights of association and where trade unions vocally defend the rights of expression and assembly of NGOs.

A third internal challenge is for civil society to articulate a coherent vision for a more just and equitable society. One of the criticisms of the so called ‘anti-globalisation’ movement is that it is against everything imaginable, but not for anything discernible. Although many within the movement are working proactively for social and economic justice, civil society is challenged to move beyond debate and ad hoc mobilisations and to formulate a strategy for achieving its vision. The core issue however may not be an absence of alternative visions, but rather the fact that the world’s powerful governments appear unwilling to engage with these alternatives.

The fourth challenge stems from within our movements as well as from external sources and relates to the legitimacy, transparency and accountability of civil society. Civil society continues to influence policies and set the trend for debates on several key issues ranging from respect for human rights, debt relief, gender equality, freedom of expression, to name but a few. Following the success of civil society in articulating these issues, civil society is at risk of becoming a victim of its own and sometimes the exaggerated expectations of other people. Critics have identified and targeted the vulnerable aspects of civil society. They have called upon civil society groups to ‘practise what they preach’ by instituting high standards of legitimacy, transparency and accountability. It is often said that civil society groups don’t represent the views of anyone but themselves and that if they are accountable at all, it is usually ‘upward’ to their funders rather than ‘downward’ to those they purportedly serve. Legitimacy cannot be taken for granted and must be continuously earned. Civil society groups are however confronting this challenge. Self-regulation mechanisms such as codes of ethics and standards of excellence have been adopted at the national level by civil society in several countries; a culture of transparency in governance structures is also gaining strength across the sector. Civil society groups work to derive mandates and legitimacy for the activities by consulting extensively with relevant stakeholders in society.

There is a powerful accountability factor at play in the functioning of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) because they are compelled to deliver if they are to continue receiving funding. Whether funding is received from government departments, individuals, foundations, business

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organisations or multilateral institutions, resources will not continue to be available if civic organisations do not perform on the basis of their vision, mission and objectives. Most governments, and intergovernmental organisations to a lesser extent, are guaranteed a revenue flow from taxation or from countries' annual member contributions even if performance is mediocre. The issue of legitimacy though is a valid one, particularly when it is voiced with an eye to building up the long term credibility and effectiveness of civil society as an actor.

It is important to make mention of the fact that as civil society continues to influence public policies and responds to the ever increasing challenges faced by citizens in this era of globalisation, it is crucial for civil society to build capacity, human and otherwise, and to develop appropriate research tools so that contributions to public policy and response to critics are credible and of high quality. The changing dynamics of global events also means that civil society should be kept abreast with social, political and economic developments. There is also the need for civil society to develop an effective global infrastructure that would monitor and highlight challenges to civil society at local, national and cultural levels and provide adequate responses to these challenges.

To conclude this section, building coalitions of civil society networks become easy if the power imbalances between civil society organisations are reduced through an agreed set of norms between local/smaller civic groups and those that work at national, regional and global levels. By adopting measures to enhance transparency, accountability and legitimacy, civil society concedes to be open to inputs from those they serve and identify areas that need improvements in their work and areas where impact will be greatly felt if they build coalitions.

External Challenges

The first challenge that originates from outside of civil society is the threats to its very existence which is closely associated with the so called 'global war on terror.' Many countries are increasingly passing legislation that is premised on the 'global fight against terrorism.' Some of the legislation restricts the activities and operations of civil society organisations. The implementation of laws related to the 'war on terror' attack the activities of civil society organisations and has led to the abuse of the human rights of some citizens. Following the

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events of September 11 2001, there is now a tendency for the reduction or total cutting off of funding for organisations or groups that are perceived to be having links with ‘terror’ organisations even though sometimes such allegations cannot be substantiated with credible evidence. This impedes the ability of civil society networks to build coalitions as collaboration with other groups that are perceived by donors to have ‘links’ with terrorism will lead to a withdrawal of funding and this will put limits on the activities of these networks. Perhaps what we also need to start debating as civil society is the over-dependence on several donors in the North for funding.

Secondly, civil society has grown in terms of numbers and influence in certain countries and regions of the world but in other countries the pace of growth is slower. Governments in countries like Russia, Egypt and Zimbabwe have attacked civil society and instituted policies that severely restrict their operations because they feel threatened by the activities of these networks. In Zimbabwe, government finds it difficult to make a distinction between civil society and the opposition and perceives both as cohorts of countries in the South. Furthermore, some organisations now claim to be part of the civil society family and benefit from the rights and status of civil society but prevent others from enjoying such rights. This compels some civil society networks to spend more time and resources responding to government policies and asserting their legitimacy and constraints their effectiveness in forming alliances and building coalitions with other associations or networks.

Thirdly, there is a disturbing trend in the manner in which funds are disbursed. Funding is now channelled to local civil society organisations with well defined mandates and with details on how the funds should be used which sometimes compromises the objectives and mandates of these groups. At times emphasis is placed on service delivery and related activities at the micro level. The decrease in funding to civil society organisations poses challenges to those regional and global civil society groups that would want to focus on activism and advocacy and not necessarily on service delivery. Civil society organisations may want to build coalitions with associations or networks who focus on other sectors but may be unable to do so in a flexible manner since they have been given boundaries within which they can operate by their funders.

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To conclude this section, the imposition of anti-terror legislation restricts the space of civil society and even prevents civic groups from engaging and forming coalitions with others whom governments view as having links with groups accused of ‘supporting terrorism.’ Growth in civil society is uneven and repressive legislation in some countries weakens civil society. In some cases, governments have actually hindered the process of coalition building by preventing civil society networks from working with or engaging other networks in their respective countries.

Opportunities for Civil Society Coalition Building

Despite the above challenges, globalisation has brought the peoples of the world closer together. It is now faster and easier for citizens in one part of the world to be aware of the human rights abuses for example taking place in another part of the world. Globalisation has opened up several opportunities for citizens and groups to form alliances and advocate for common goals. Some of these opportunities are highlighted below.

In the past, most of the work of civil society focused on the micro level wherein they were involved with the provision of important services to vulnerable communities in health care, education, legal advice, professional training, humanitarian relief and women’s empowerment. In the 1980s there was a popular slogan, “think globally but act locally.” Civil society groups have recognised the need to review this slogan as experience has shown that in and of itself, acting locally will not get to the root causes of many social and economic problems. Since power and decision-making processes now reside at global levels with supranational bodies, civil society groups are aware of the fact that they need to ‘think locally and act globally’ as well. Conscious of this fact, civil society groups are now coming together in coalitions at the global level to advocate in favour of issues such as debt cancellation and climate change that affect citizens at the local level.

As civil society has matured, its credibility with outside audiences has grown. Many governments increasingly seek to harness the expertise and local knowledge of civil society groups in policy making. High profile civil society groups have developed a certain ‘brand recognition’; their endorsements or criticisms carry weight with the public. Civil society

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organisations should take advantage of such opportunities when they arise and build capacity so that they are able to respond effectively to the needs and requests of governments.

Other opportunities for civil society action have opened in terms of the spaces that are increasingly being created for civic action. For example the space offered by the World Social Forum (WSF) indicates that civil society is making progress but there is more that still needs to be done. The WSF and other meetings that bring together civil society groups provide spaces where citizens' voices are taken into consideration when debating issues related to social, political and economic justice. These meetings are venues where citizens and groups who feel increasingly alienated from the prevailing global system join together to explore alternative visions for a more ethical form of globalisation that works for the benefit of average people rather than simply for the benefit of powerful interests.

Other opportunities have been created as civil society organisations, trade unions, associations and other networks build coalitions to respond to transnational issues. For example there has been the unification of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the World Confederation of Labour and a few other independent trade unions. Such coalition building exercises enable civil society to act in unison in a given array of areas and respond in a credible manner to global challenges.

Another example of civic groups coming together to confront transnational issues is seen in the activities of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP). GCAP depict signs of hope for a more united civil society that cuts across different sectors, countries and regions. GCAP brings together international NGOs, trade unions, grassroots organisations, youth groups and other networks that engage and work together in over 100 countries. Supporting the GCAP Facilitation Team has helped CIVICUS build effective collaboration within civil society, enhanced its capacity to engage governments and international institutions and increased civil society's experience with political processes. Once again GCAP provides another opportunity for citizens, associations and groups from different parts of the world to come together in coalitions and highlight issues related to poverty, inequality and the debt question that affects citizens all over the world

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The strength embedded issue-based coalitions is seen in the activities of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). The ICBL started as an NGO in the global North in 1992 and was taken up in the global South in 1995. The ICBL now consists of over 1200 NGOs in 60 countries, some of which are grouped in national campaign structures, forums and coalitions. The ICBL and GCAP highlight the need for and strength of powerful coalitions. The strength inherent in these coalitions is evidenced in the fact that governments have begun to address some of the issues raised and some even include these issues in their national agendas. However, these networks have more to do with issues of 'global concern'. What we ought to do now is to start creating movements of global coalitions that focus primarily on civil society existence, expression and engagement.

Where to from here?

Decision-making has transcended national boundaries and policies that affect citizens are formulated at the global level by actors who are not accountable to citizens, especially those in the global South. It therefore becomes difficult for local civil society groups, because of capacity and the scope of their work, to effectively respond to issues that evolve from the global arena. One way of addressing this problem is to form coalitions between local, regional and global civil society. If local civil society groups are able to forward information on domestic human rights abuses to partners with transnational human rights networks, the transnational networks can place these issues on the global agenda and, together with local civil society, exert pressure on the state wherein these abuses are committed.

The grassroots action we have witnessed on the streets of Porto Alegre and outside the headquarters of the World Bank and IMF is emerging in direct response to a perception that increasingly important decisions affecting peoples lives and well-being are being made in non-transparent ways in supranational institutions that are not accountable to citizens or accessible to citizen engagement. Grassroots action has brought together citizens from different countries that have formed coalitions and advocate in favour of specific issues. Coalitions increase pressure on the actors in the north and expand the scope and influence of those that belong to the coalitions.

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There is need to democratise individual global governance institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank, IMF and WTO to allow for coalitions of networks to be represented in the decision-making processes of these institutions. Such coalitions would represent a broad range of citizens from different regions but would focus on common goals or objectives. The Bank and IMF are now less dependent upon contributions from rich countries than they once were and it is essential that their governance structures be changed radically to reflect these shifts. It is naïve to expect that institutions established sixty years ago in a different global context can be more appropriate and relevant in our age with only minor changes. The time has definitely come for a revamping of global governance institutions within a more visionary framework that puts the interests of people at the forefront of deliberations aimed at substantive institutional change.

In this current era we should not allow institutional limitations to constrain our ability to envision a different kind of global governance framework. We have to pose some bold questions about the fundamental changes that are needed to create a framework that is fairer and more equitable than the one we are currently working within and that has a realistic chance of supporting initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals. We must question the prevailing logic of a system that energetically enables the movement of capital, but not of people, across boundaries.

To conclude, permit me to state that it is possible for civil society to counter the growing influence of global markets and the receding influence of states. At the moment, there are few structures at the global level that can effectively counter the growing influence of markets. For some citizens who live under non-democratic regimes, coalitions provide avenues for voice and participation in decision making processes. Coalitions amplify the visibility and voice of a broader range of actors. Civil society groups may focus on different issues but their approaches, competences and problems have much in common.