Research Paper

A Civil or Uncivil Civil Society?

Liv Tørres

LA LUCHA ES EL ÚNICO CAMINO

PATHFINDERS
FOR PEACEFUL, JUST AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES
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About the Author

Liv Tørres is is the director of the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, hosted by the Center on International Cooperation at New York University. Pathfinders is a group of UN member states, international organizations, global partnerships, civil society, and the private sector working to accelerate the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals' targets for peace, justice and inclusion (SDG16+).

Tørres has worked on international humanitarian, peace, and development issues, as both a scholar and practitioner, for three decades. Before joining Pathfinders, she was the executive director of the Nobel Peace Center. She previously served as the secretary general of Norwegian People's Aid, a humanitarian, development, and disarmament organization operating in over 40 countries, after several years of leading its International Department.

Tørres holds a PhD in political science from the University of Oslo. She is an active commentator whose expertise is in demand in fields including peacebuilding, conflict resolution, justice and equality, inclusive societies, development policy, and democratization.

About the Grand Challenge

Inequality and exclusion are among the most pressing political issues of our age. They are on the rise and the anger felt by citizens towards elites perceived to be out-of-touch constitutes a potent political force. Policymakers and the public are clamouring for a set of policy options that can arrest and reverse this trend. The Grand Challenge on Inequality and Exclusion seeks to identify practical and politically viable solutions to meet the targets on equitable and inclusive societies in the Sustainable Development Goals. Our goal is for national governments, intergovernmental bodies, multilateral organizations, and civil society groups to increase commitments and adopt solutions for equality and inclusion.

The Grand Challenge is an initiative of the Pathfinders, a multi-stakeholder partnership that brings together 36 member states, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector to accelerate delivery of the SDG targets for peace, justice and inclusion. Pathfinders is hosted at New York University's Center on International Cooperation.

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Photo credit: General strike in Madrid, Spain. Flickr user Montecruz Foto. (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Table of Contents

> *Wait! Don't be fooled by the spring, the clearness of the sky, or the light of the dawn;*
> *For on the horizon lies the horror of darkness, rumble of thunder, and blowing of winds.*
> *Beware, for below the ash there is fire.*
> *— Al-Shabbi[1]*

Summary

Civil society is part and parcel of the institutional architecture that will be crucial to help us out of our current crisis of staggering inequality, pandemic trauma and required recovery. Yet, civil society is large, complex, fragmented, and polarized. It gained renewed and considerable attention during, and after, the 'Third Wave' of democracy in the early 1990s when trade unions, professional organizations, women's and civic organizations, as well as religious organizations and churches in many countries mobilized for democratic change. This was, of course, not the first nor the last period of civic action and mobilization. Civil society has, however, changed dramatically over the past decades. The number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has grown. Membership in civil society organizations has kept up, but the meaning of membership has most probably changed. Civic space is under considerable pressure, while social movements, activism, and protests have increased. All in all, civil society now represents a wide variety of actors with different governance structures, with/without membership, varying in size and agenda.

Good governance, sustainable development, inclusion, as well as fair distribution and social contracts all depend on a strong civil society. We need the strong organizations that can build resilience, community engagement, and social capital during crises. First and foremost, however, it is organized civil society—with structures, leadership, membership, sustainable strategies, and a policy-oriented agenda—that can most likely impact governance and democracy constructively, as well as fight inequality.

With current pressures on civic space and the right to organize, efforts to build democratic organizations face massive challenges. First, in order move forward now with the aim of new social contracts, more resilience, and a reinforced recovery, we need stronger mobilization to protect civic space. In several countries around the world, civil society is increasingly confronting major stumbling blocks when it comes to their freedom to operate, organize, and mobilize their constituencies. Second, we need to identify what we mean by civil society when promoting its place as a pro-democracy actor and/or at the negotiation table. Simply calling for "civil society representation" at global or national levels, or "civil society support" in development aid risks representation by actors who are not truly representative or espouse undemocratic values. Third, we need to ensure that more and better data is available in order to assess both the level of respect civil society enjoys and the problems it faces in organizing; how civil society mobilizes participation and membership; how to identify the "good actors"; and how to assess civil society's strength and its contribution to society. Fourth, we need to soberly think through the types, channels, and scale of funding for civil society organizations. Finally, civil society organizations need to start organizing again, bolstering their structural and representative integrity.

When civic space is restricted and organizations are undermined and/or weak, not only do the people lose, so do leaders and governments. Unrest, mistrust, and anger will not go away on their own.

1. What Kind of Civil Society Do We Want?

Skyrocketing unemployment, inequality, and escalating street protests are just a few of the symptoms of the crisis we find ourselves in currently. It is the capacity, strength, and trust of our institutions that will be carrying us through this crisis. Civil society is part and parcel of that institutional architecture. The way it is set up, how well coordinated and organized it is, and how much its organizations are trusted, is relevant for the levels of tensions and conflicts we will get in the future and the type of recovery we will achieve. The extent to which civil society is well organized in democratic representative organizations will determine whether we have anarchy and unrest in the streets or negotiations around social dialogue tables. It will influence the extent of sustainable development and growth. It will impact on whether we achieve fair distribution and inclusive societies, or alternatively will be rocked by polarization, tensions, and fragmentation. It will also prompt what can be resilient prevention against new crises, be they pandemics or other types of shocks or fragility. The US National Intelligence Council argues (2021)[2] that the most effective states going forward towards 2040 are likely those that can build societal consensus and trust toward collective action, and harness the relative expertise, capabilities, and relationships of nonstate actors to complement state capacity.

There is much of praise for civil society these days and a lot of it well-earned. Civil society has contributed to democratic change in numerous countries over the past decades. It has successfully campaigned for social inclusion programs and welfare states. We believe that the growing inequality that undermines trust in many countries is lowest where organized civil society is strongest.[3] It is an essential part of democracy and popular rule in the truest sense of these words. With democratic systems currently under increasing pressure, it is evident that leaders tempted by authoritarian tendencies often start the process of democratic backsliding with attacks on the freedom to organize and speak,[4] and by cracking down on civil society. Whilst some governments are encroaching on civic space, protests are moving on to the streets, as a result. Protests and mobilization are part and parcel of well-functioning democracies. They are, and should be, constructive feedback channels for popular responses to governments and leaders, making them accountable, promoting peace, defending human rights, as well as fostering the well-being and promoting the interests of the populations. Of course, protest tactics vary, and while causing public disruption by blocking roads etc. can heighten awareness, some forms of violent protest can spiral into chaos and conflict.

We have seen the best and the worst of civil society during this pandemic. There are impressive organizations, volunteers, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) mobilizing to help people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and simultaneously mobilizing to fight climate change, racism, and for other social causes. But people mobilizing against the COVID-19 vaccine with automatic weapons on their hips are also part of civil society. So are radicalized groups. Likewise, are commercialized, high-income, and non-for-profit organizations earning money from social services during the pandemic. The large organizations with massive membership and the small NGOs with none are both part and parcel of the same civil society. Political parties are similarly included, coming in all shapes and sizes. While some thinkers look at civic space as a site for democratic mobilization, others criticize it for lack of legitimacy and representation. Civic space has becoming increasingly fragmented and polarized over the past decades, as is reflected in wider politics and other spheres of society. Faith groups and religious groupings are gaining ground.

So, what kind of civil society organizations do we want and need for good governance, inclusion, and fair distribution of resources? What do we actually mean by civil society? While both service providers and information bureaus can deliver valuable services, it takes membership, strong structures, sustainable strategies, and a policy-oriented agenda to really impact governance, democracy, and to fight inequality. This often grows out of local, small-scale movements, mobilizations, and engagement, but with current pressures on civic space and the right to organize, efforts to build democratic organizations are facing massive challenges. Civil society represents in many ways "the people", and channeled ways of consulting people between elections is a crucial way for leaders and governments to stay informed, representative,

accountable, and to build trust. When civic space is restricted and organizations undermined, the people lose, but so do leaders and governments because mistrust, and anger will not go away on its own. Whether protest and mobilization is peaceful, constructive, and civil or rather than destructive, anarchical, "uncivil", violent waves of anger is up to the people, but also up to governments. In turn, for people to best affect governance and distribution in constructive ways, they have to get active, mobilized, and organized. We will, in the following, look closer at the types and role of civil society, as well as the ways it has contributed to good governance, inclusion, and redistribution – and may in the future.

2. Civil Society as Democratic Agents and Agents Fighting Inequality and Exclusion

In the past decades, development practitioners, academics, and politicians have all talked loudly about the constructive role of civil society in democratization and development processes. Yet, the concept of civil society carries a number of different interpretations and connotations. To some, civil society means a civic culture and values, to others it indicates everything that is outside the domain of the public sector. And to yet others, it implies organizations and organized interests. We will lean on the latter interpretation in the following, but even that refers to a wide array of groups: community groups and organizations (CSOs), trade unions and student´s organizations, indigenous groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), charitable organizations, professional associations, foundations, and political parties (not in government), as well as faith-based organizations engaged in social and political activities. It includes[5] a broad variety of service providers, and campaigners; watchdogs and those mobilizing for active citizenship and, for example, elections, as well as those civil society organizations participating in global institutions. However, the expected value and turnover from civil society activities will depend on what kind of civil society organization we talk about.

Civil society is, of course, not new, but the term "civil society" became popular again in political, academic, as well as economic discussions in the 1980s and 90s, when it became identified with non-state movements challenging authoritarian regimes during what Huntington (1991) named the "Third Wave of democracy" in central and eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa. The concept goes back to the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, who looked at civil society as the realm of contestation where social actors challenged and constrained the power of the state, and to the French aristocrat, Tocqueville, who during his visit to the United States in the 1830s became convinced that associations operating outside the sphere of government and economic life were essential bulwarks against democratic decay and despotism.[6] Both looked primarily at civil society as organized interests, but while Gramsci looked at its role as challenging state power and pushing for democracy and redistribution, Tocqueville looked at it as organized interests that keeps democracy responsive and effective, ensuring the loyalty of its citizens and providing a basis for its endurance after it is established.[7]

Civil society gained considerable attention during, and not the least after, this 'Third Wave' of democracy when trade unions, professional organizations, women's and civic organizations, as well as religious organizations and churches in South Africa, Poland, Brazil, the Philippines, South Korea, and many other countries mobilized for democratic change. They often had large membership, collective strength, and had built their muscle based on branch structures, statutes, dialogue, negotiations, and a leadership dependent on and shaped by internal democracy and trust. Concepts such as shop stewards, mandating, and accountability marked the operations of many trade union movements, but also those of other

organizations. Trust and responsibility were internal organizational assets, and assets that the elected leaders were expected to build. With leadership came responsibility, accountability, and a mandate for the term. And if accountability and responsibility was not delivered on, trust would wane, and the next elections be in jeopardy. Organizational participation became learning ground for wider democratic aspirations and participation in many of these organizations.

"Third-wave" or "post-Cold War" democratization academics[8] such as Huntington (1991), Putnam et al (1993 & 2000), Diamond (1994), Linz and Stepan (1996), as well as Fukuyama (1995) championed the view that an autonomous and lively civil society and a democratic civic culture, developed by that same civil society, were essentials not only for democratic change, but also for democratic consolidation in transition democracies. The foundations for the broad optimism about the role of civil society among both academia and politicians in this period were the assumptions that civil society associations would build social capital and help promote trust and mutual help among citizens as steppingstones for democracy. Organized life was expected to help train people in many of the skills needed for democracy: dialogue, compromises, mandating principles, accountability etc. Hence, the organizations would function as a sort of laboratory for democracy. Haggard & Kaufman[9] point to civil society organizations being able to turn out their members—i.e. put collective pressure on governments and leaders, and facilitating inclusive horizontal coordination across groups who would otherwise have loyalties elsewhere—basically redefining individual interests and linking them to collective identities.

> " .... Our peace could not have been achieved, nor could it have been sustained, without the persistent and courageous activism of civic organizations campaiging for a more equal and peaceful society. The trade union movement, on an all-Ireland basis, has been the greatest, most consistent, most courageous opponent of sectarianism. Many of those campaigns against sectarianism for the welfare of citizens and workers were led by the women of Ireland, North and South...
> — ILO as a Global Catalyst. Michael D. Higgins, President Ireland

Putnam et al (1993, 2000) looked at organizations building social capital as a public good. He saw participation in civic organizations as enhancing general social trust, thus contributing to better governance and supporting democracy. And his seminal study of social capital in Italy became important in setting this phase of a new understanding of civil society work. Not only was civil society expected to spearhead democratization, some even looked at democratic transitions or consolidation as being improbable or impossible without the development of a vibrant and robust organized civil society. Yet, others, building up under what became power resource theory, held that strong associations were needed for a fairer distribution of resources and therefore contributed to more stability, inclusion, and more stable democracies. Of course, it was not all that glittering, but expectations about the redistributing and democratizing role of civil society were high.

3. New Parameters For Civic Space and Civic Action?

Three decades after the third democratic wave, the global climate has changed, democracy is under increasing pressure, and civil society has also changed – all of it in ways that may make people more likely to seek sweeping political change by taking to the streets rather than seeking change through other more organized means and platforms. The pro-democracy protests and uprisings that took place in the Middle East and North Africa beginning in 2010 and 2011 illustrates this well. This wave of mobilization began when protests in Tunisia and Egypt toppled their regimes in quick succession, inspiring similar attempts in other Arab countries. This was often met with violent crackdowns by their authorities. Yet, while this mobilization or civil resistance caught the world´s attention as an "Arab spring", it was neither new nor only an Arab wave of mobilization. Regular waves of mobilization happened both before and after 2011. 2011 was in fact marked by mobilization in many cities around the world. Nor was it a spring delivering more mature democracies to come. Rather, the "spring" was soon to be taken over by a long hard "season".

In parallel with civil mobilization and resistance increasing in many parts of the world over the past two decades, there also seems to have been a far more diverse and fragmented civil society developing. While the broad belief in the democratic and liberal value of civil society has remained strong at least in parts of the world, reality seems to have changed on the ground. Over the past two or three decades, space for civil society has been steadily shrinking globally. Civil society itself seems to have changed.

When **civic space** is open, i.e. citizens are able to organize, assemble peacefully, and freely express views and opinions, democracies deliver better and trust is generally high. A state's ability to hold to their duty to protect its citizens, as well as respect and facilitate their fundamental rights is essential for this. The CIVICUS Monitor[10] analyses the extent to which critical civil and "political" rights are being respected, and the degree to which states are protecting civil society. Crucial civic and democratic freedoms were already being denied in many countries before the 2020 pandemic hit. According to CIVICUS[11] less than four per cent of the world's population lived in countries where the core civic freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression were widely respected. Repression of civil society is severe and intensifying, and often the first actions by leaders tempted to suppress democracy. Citizens are taking to the streets in response. According to V-Dem 2021,[12] the final toll on democracy may turn out to be high. Authoritarian regimes' stifling of debates and suppression of democratic rights has become the order of the day in many places.

At the same time, we have also seen **escalating mobilization** in civil society over the past decades. Rising civil unrest is emerging as a key future risk factor, according to the Global Peace Index,[13] with riots, general strikes, and anti-government demonstrations increasing substantially since 2011. The number of protest movements around the world have more than tripled in less than 15 years and has also grown increasingly more violent, according to new research by Ortiz et al (2021).[14] Civil unrest doubled from 2011 to 2020 and 96 countries recorded a violent demonstration in 2019, as citizens protested against a range of issues, from economic hardship and police brutality to political instability. Riots around the world increased, according to GPI by 282 percent in the last decade, while general strikes were up by 821 percent.[15] Europe experienced the most protests, riots, and strikes. This is all expected to worsen with the economic impact of the pandemic.

Eight years after the Arab Spring, the 2019 protests took the form of regular mass demonstrations[16] that lasted for months. Throughout the world, citizens took to the streets to raise their voices against inequality, corruption, and bad governance:[17] Sudan's al-Bashir was ousted from 30 years in power. Iraq's prime minister Adel Abdul Mahdi resigned, and so did Lebanon's prime minister Saad Hariri, amid protests. Algeria saw the departure of longtime President Bouteflika and President Evo Morales of Bolivia was forced to step down after mass protests. While growing mass resistance movements seem to reflect a breakdown of trust and social contracts between citizens and leaders, their form and character also seem to replicate a new type of protest: mass mobilization on social media platforms sparked by legitimate issues. Most often, it is a call for democracy that, according to Ortiz et al (2021), mobilizes the new protest movements.[18] In many cases, it is youth, and particularly "graduate youth" with education but no work prospects that kickstart the protests, followed by urban poor and working class. In Ecuador, Hungary, and Jordan, labor unions have been key leaders of protests,[19] while working class citizens of various age groups have provided support for protest actions in Iran and Venezuela.

Civil resistance has according to Chenoweth (2021), increased and has also been more effective than armed struggle in achieving major political concessions over the past decades. More than half of the nonviolent resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2019 succeeded, compared to only about a quarter of the violent ones. Civil resistance is a method of conflict waged by unarmed civilians, involving noninstitutional action and aimed at changing the status quo. Civil resistance can include a set of coordinated actions including protests, strikes, boycotts, go-slows, stay-aways[20], and petitions, counting all in all about 198 types of different resistance, according to Gene Sharp.[21] In the past century, hundreds of civil resistance campaigns have worked to depose authoritarian, antidemocratic, illiberal or corrupt regimes. Examples are the South African anti-apartheid struggle and the US civil rights movement from the 60s; the Palestinian First Intifada (1987-93); Gandhi´s civil disobedience (satyagraha) campaigns against colonial rule in the 1950s; as well as the many pro-democracy movements from the 1960s leading to the 'Third Wave' mentioned before. Large-scale movements have fundamentally reshaped the political landscape of many countries around the world.

Overall, political violence decreased in every region (except for Africa) in 2020 compared to 2019.[22] Still, political violence increased in more countries than it decreased. State forces remained the most active conflict agents, but there is a continued rise of violent non-state actors. Furthermore, identity militia activity, defined by ACLED[23] as armed groups organized around a collective, common feature including community, ethnicity, region, religion, or livelihood is on the rise and increased its engagement in violence. And finally, despite the pandemic, demonstrations increased worldwide. Following an initial drop at the start of the health crisis, overall demonstration activity rose, according to ACLED by 7 percent in 2020 compared to 2019,[24] with an increase recorded in 58 percent of all countries covered. Approximately 93 percent of all demonstrations were peaceful, while 7 percent were met with some form of intervention. Demonstrations were less deadly in 2020 than the year before: ACLED records a 38 percent decline in the number of fatalities reported during demonstrations last year. Data on American demonstration trends are not included in the ACLED comparison above. However, in 2020, the United States registered the highest number of demonstrations in the world, with nearly as many as the next two countries, India and Pakistan, combined.

In parallel with, and as a basis for, the escalating mobilization, we have seen decreased levels of trust in governments, institutions, and politicians. The Edelman Trust Barometer shows[25] that in past years, good economic conditions had presaged rising levels of trust. This still applies, in their view, in developing markets, but in the developed world, corporate malfeasance, government corruption, fake news, and income inequality have undermined trust. People feel in other words that they are not getting their fair share. With the pandemic leading to increased inequality and growing impatience and criticism of authorities, we should not expect the initial surge in government trust that followed the pandemic to last. Furthermore, the "mass-class" trust divide that Edelman reports on has become chronic, reaching record levels in more countries than ever, with a global 14-point gap between informed public and mass population trust in institutions. In developed markets, under 20 percent of the general population express confidence in the system and 73 percent are looking for change.[26]

4. A New, Modern, More Complex Civil Society?

The civil society that this increasing mobilization and resistance is growing out of is complex, fragmented, and multifaceted. The original 'Third Wave' thinking assumed that organized civil society would have an impact on democratization and democratic consolidation because organizations served as laboratories influencing people's democratic values and skills. On that basis, civil society organizations were expected to serve as inclusive platforms building social capital and trust, cross-cutting other cleavages. They were presumed to gather more and better information about government action from the ground and hence serve as a more targeted action platform. Several organizations were also set up with the direct "political aims" of influencing policy, regime transformations, developing human rights campaigns, et al. Hundreds of civil resistance campaigns and organizations wrestled to depose authoritarian, corrupt or antidemocratic regimes. Yet, not all civil society organizations and actors work with such missions or impact. We will in the following exclude the private corporate sector, political parties, and universities, focusing instead on those parts of civil society that are generally referred to as "civil society". When politicians, activists, and academics currently talk about the positive value of the sector vis-à-vis governance, redistribution, and development, they generally refer to three types of entities: NGOs; various types of interest or issue-based organizations, and more loosely organized social movements.

We do know that the sector is large. While it is hard to quantify just **how big civil society sector is globally**, a 2011 study stated[27] that NGOs across 40 countries represent $2.2 trillion in operating expenditures, i.e. more than the gross domestic product of all but six countries, employing around 54 million full-time workers and with a global volunteer workforce of over 350 million. The number of organizations was assumed to be highest in developed markets, but has increased substantially also in developing and emerging economies. India and China are, for example, estimated to have large numbers of NGOs: 460,000 and 3.3 million, respectively.[28] The **number and flora of NGOs** seems to have increased substantially over the past decades, the service delivery NGOs among them likewise, thanks in part to global development aid. The NGO sector include many highly professional organizations and organizations crucial for democratization-processes, but all in all entail everything from a "one-man NGO show", to Western-dominated NGOs, to the big issue-based professional NGOs like Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, and

large-scale NGOs doing humanitarian and/or development aid internationally. Organizations likewise range from the small national NGOs to broad umbrella organizations at the global level, such a CIVICUS or the Civil Society Platform for Peace Building and State Building,[29] working to amplify the voices of small national organizations. NGOs generally receive higher scores of trust than other institutions, but still only about half of people trust NGOs, as shown by both the Edelman Barometer[30] and our own run of World Value Surveys (WVS).[31]

Many NGOs are professional, delivery- and service-oriented organizations operating with humanitarian, emergency or development aims. They perform valuable services in several countries that states are unable to deliver, and that the corporate sector do not consider profitable. Yet, while they may have an indirect impact on democratic transitions by contributing to participatory learning and helping eradicate poverty, etc., they may not necessarily have political goals of agenda-setting, or changing the power-balance, or democratizing the state. Many may be providing social services with the goal of the state taking the services over, and some successfully so, while others may in practice contribute to a continuous privatization of essential social services. In many contemporary authoritarian states, governments permit non-state associations to operate as formally self-organizing structures, delivering services that the state is unable or unwilling to provide and achieving some element of representation for under-represented groups as long as they do not challenge state powers. Authoritarian states have attempted to maintain this dual policy: promoting NGOs engaged in service delivery, while restricting those engaged in public discourse. Most importantly for democracy promoting goals: NGOs do not have members and therefore do not build collective democratic goals in the same way that membership-based interest- or issue-based organizations do, or how social movements support broad mobilization.

As the number and financial muscle of NGOs have increased, interest-based organizations like trade unions have reported dwindling membership over the past decades.[32] The World Value Survey (WVS) shows (See Figure 1), however, that the percentage of global respondents who say they are members of at least one civil society organization has increased over the past 20 years. Similarly, the "feminist mobilization index" finds that feminist mobilization increased[33] most rapidly between 1975 and 1985 and growth continued but slowed after 1995. However, the base is low. Furthermore, the global picture we find from the WVS hides large regional differences. Civil society organizational membership in Africa and South America seems to have risen from the end of the 1980s. Membership in Asia dropped at the turn of the century, then started rising again in the last few years. North

Figure 1: Civil society membership (1989-2020) WVS 2020

Figure 2: Membership in types of civil society organizations
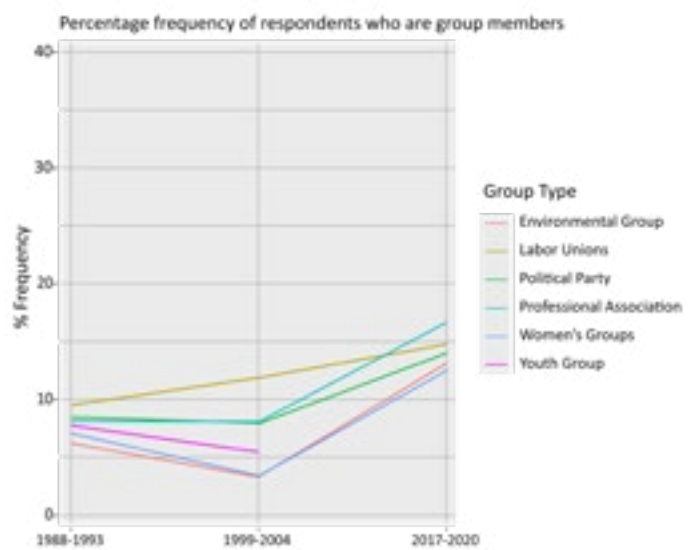
America and Europe, meanwhile, saw a rise in civil society membership at the turn of the century, but this has now dropped back to levels seen in the early 1990s. European and North American non-membership rates dipped at the millennium, then rose again. South American and African non-membership rates have fallen steadily, and Asian non-membership rose and then fell over this period. While civic space is currently under pressure globally, it seems that civil society organizations to some extent have adapted. In spite of low totals and a small decrease in the early 2000s, organizational rates seem to have picked up since then (See Figure 2).

This being said, **membership in issue-based and interest organizations probably means something else today than it did some decades in the past**. In the 1980s and 1990s, organizational membership implied branch meetings, and following up on statutes, leadership accountability, and organizational action. Today, membership could mean a follow on social media. The increasing or sustained rates of civil society organizations may be linked to increasing rates of social media penetration over the past two decades. The entrance costs for organizing through social media are low, without necessarily transferring the tools to root these groups deeply enough to be sustainable. Increasing social media penetration provides the opportunity for extraordinary expansion and the opening up of possibilities for networking and communication for civil society organizations. Yet, while this may reduce the chances of state infiltration and capture, it may also have the costs of developing shallow organizations with less activity or "democratic learning", brainstorming, and organization-building.

Transitions to democracy will transform not only governments but also impact the civil society organizations that helped bring it about. Expecting pro-democracy civil society to perform the same way after a transition to democracy as before is unrealistic, as leaders of pro-democracy forces in many successful struggles around the world have realized. Civil society organizations are apt to lose momentum. Both leaders and members often lower their guard after they have won battles. Many organizations struggle with "brain-drain" as new governments recruit new capacity. Do governments really need civil society watchdogs any longer when citizens have installed them?

Professionalization is a good thing in large-scale organizations in need of records, accounting, media presence, and organograms, yet it also carries the risk of contributing to a **growing distance between organizations and their membership**. Increasing funding to civil society organizations in many countries from the late 1980s and early 1990s may have contributed to increasing bureaucratization and distance between membership and leaders. Several studies refer to a growing disconnect[34] between large-scale organizations and the people they claim to represent, as well as a tough funding climate which has encouraged some CSOs to 'follow the money' and move away from their core mandates.[35] In some countries, transitions to democracy led to appeals for demobilization of civil society in order to give the new governments a calm honeymoon period. Massive membership vibrancy and engagement was probably also not present in the many state-administered "civil society organizations" set up after World War II in the Soviet states, China, and in the "Baath" ruled countries in the Middle East.

VanDyck (2017) argues that there is a **growing gap between organized civil society and the constituencies they represent** because of growing public distrust and uncertainty about their relevance and legitimacy and organizations failing to uphold their mandate in the face of adversity. Taylor (2011) outlines how groups can become co-opted by accepting money from governments, which limits their ability to criticize or work towards their goals for fear of 'biting the hand that feeds'.[36] Some civil society leaders also seem to feel that with representation in an increasing number of fora and partnerships, their power and influence has emerged with a sense of 'establishment-orientation,' i.e. a departure from civil society's political roots in numerous parts of the world (WEF 2013[37], Cooper 2018[38]). The 2015 "Rustler letter" from civil society leaders sent a clear appeal from civil society activists to other civil society leaders[39] to acknowledge the increasing distance between civil society leaders and their memberships. Survey data from VDem (See Figure 3[40]) show that civil society organizations still seem to entice organized people to engage in civic action, but less so than in the past. Civic engagement among non-organized people is substantially lower than amongst organized people.

Figure 3: Civil Engagement Over Time (VDem 2021)

Percentage of group members willing to take civic action.
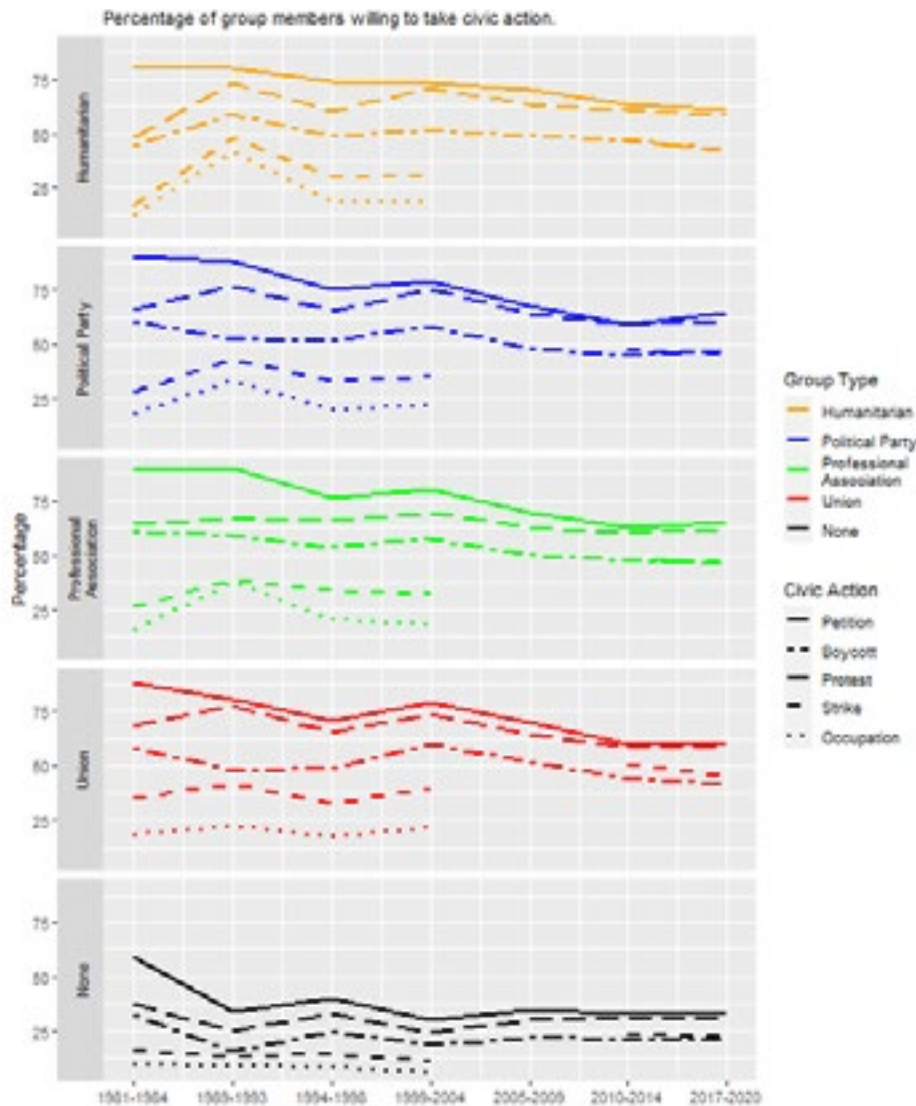
While the number of NGOs has grown and the type of interest or issue-based organizations appear to have changed, **social movements activism has thrived in the past two decades**. In parallel with increasing activism on the streets, the number of uncoordinated social movements has also increased. Many of the large-scale civil resistance movements from the past decade have been fragmented movements rather than orchestrated by unified large-scale democratic organizations. In Syria for example, the popular mobilization that started in 2011 did not come from Western-supported organizations, civil rights NGOs, human rights associations or organizations in the Arab world. Nor did it come from the state-linked "civil society" organizations, but from an unstructured and mostly leaderless group of activists and civilians. The uprising in Yemen started in similar ways. Both were also vulnerable to interventions by other forces and the popular uprisings in both places were relatively soon taken over by local, regional, and global actors with less democratic agendas.

Protest seems to have morphed into a new form over the past decades: one of mass-mobilization, not necessarily driven by an organizational basis, or what End Notes has labelled a, "global accumulation of non-movements."[41] Recent protests—including global protests against racism that were sparked by Black Lives Matter in 2019 and the 2020 murder of George Floyd in the US, as well as political demonstrations in several countries, including Belarus, Thailand, Colombia, and Nigeria—seem to be less likely to have had an organizational basis driven by a strong membership base, branches, statutes, and structures than similar mobilization waves in previous decades. While the rate of organizing has increased slightly, the rate of activism and mobilization seems to have increased more. With activism come opportunities to take quick action and gain power, but also risks of exclusion and fragmentation.

Social media often helps to kickstart protest action, but does not necessarily make it more efficient and has not helped activists to build durable organizations or foster long-term planning. Movements that lack such attributes are vulnerable.[42]

While the broadly shared belief in civil society's constructive role for promoting inclusion, democracy, and fighting inequality has remained strong since the 1990s, the past decades have also seen increasingly vocal skepticism of the role of civil society. Some even question the 'heroic' narrative of civil society in the twentieth century, during the 'Third Wave' democratization processes in Latin America and Eastern Europe.[43] Others argue that the presumed linkage between civil society and democratization is altogether a Western concept which overlooks the realities outside the Western world (Lewis 2013). Some would share Spires' (2011) view that, "we should not assume that NGOs in an authoritarian state, even independent grassroots organizations, are working toward democratic purposes." What is seen simply as a simplistic linkage between growth in associational life and democratization has led to what Encarnacion (2006) and others have termed a 'civil society backlash'.[44] Young quotes critics arguing that Western-style nongovernmental organizations are appearing increasingly ineffective, tired, and out of touch – artificial creations often nourished by foreign supporters that lack real domestic constituencies and the ability to sustain themselves locally.[45]

Many NGOs and organizations operate in authoritarian, semi-authoritarian or unfree countries without challenging the states. Some have also come to reflect the behavior and attitudes of states.[46] Jamal (2007) argues that Palestinian civil society organizations started operating like the new Palestinian authorities after the mid 1990s Oslo Accords. LeVan argues that associations in Nigeria do not necessarily promote the trust and mutual support which builds

> 66 *State terror works in part through the fragmentation of civil society.* 99
> — *Hannah Arendt. 1951 The Origins of Totalitarianism*

> 66 *Civil society is ok, as long as the organizations perform social* 99
> *services that can help the state.*
> — *Aan San Suu Kyi at a meeting of civil*
> *society leaders in Oslo 2012*

democracy,[47] and Helliker (2012) argues that civil society in Zimbabwe have begun to resemble an authoritarian state. CIVICUS found that[48] non-state actors in close proximity to political forces that control the state play a crucial role in restricting critical civil society and legitimizing further state restrictions in Palestine, Bangladesh, and Zimbabwe. Bernhard argues that the populist forces that have led the backlash against liberal democracy in many countries have relied on civil society mobilization in their strategy of taking power.[49] Some would argue that international funding has distorted civil society in some countries and even contributed to them legitimizing authoritarian regimes rather than supporting democratization.[50] In the Middle East for example, civil society programs and Western geopolitical interests have frequently been viewed as interconnected (Lewis 2013) while the opposition to authoritarian regimes in the MENA region, including during the "Arab Spring" emerged primarily among actors outside the world of the Western-backed, "official" civil society.[51] The Arab uprising occurred despite nearly two decades of Western promotion of democracy[52] and support to civil society groups, not because of it. And in Palestine, civil society that organized the, in many ways successful, "First Intifada" later became undermined by a combination of pressures from the new Palestinian Authority, Israeli occupation, and international largescale support for civil society.[53]

All in all, it seems like the NGO sector may easily operate in all kinds of settings and only those that directly challenge the authorities will have problems in authoritarian settings and countries where civic space is under pressure. Many NGOs are tackling systemic injustice, inspiring meaningful actions, and building powerful supporter relationships, and that may contribute to building the collective strength and long-term power of movements. But rarely can an NGO legitimately claim to have catalyzed collective action from diverse communities. It is only where civil society take on the role of public discourse and criticism that it becomes a threat to authoritarian leaders and states, whilst they will

be left alone if only "self-organizing" to protect social, developmental or humanitarian needs.

Not only is **civil society** complex and fragmented, it is also, like politics, **increasingly polarized**. It would be a mistake to think of civil society as uniformly virtuous. At point of departure, NGOs, interest organizations, and social movements work in different sectors and towards different goals. NGOs also have different DNA[54] from social movements, as Open Democracy once stated, with NGOs often employ professional communications machines and have layers of decision-making to manage risk, protect a brand, and ensure consistency across staff and offices. Movements, in contrast, are usually under-resourced and often lack developed management and coordination structures. Social media, instead of serving as the global democratic platform some of us hoped for, has intensified mistrust and increased polarization. While civil society historically has often been an engine of democratic change, in each of these struggles there was a sector of civil society that stood on the other side of the same issues. In an era of increased mobilization, but also of dubious commitments to democracy and human rights, it is important not to make blanket assumptions about the character of civil society. All protests are also not necessarily promoting progressive or pro-democratic goals,[55] but nativists, chauvinists, supremacists, and others with exclusionary agendas are just as able to use civil disobedience to advance their aims. Polarization is growing in civil society, as in politics. With growing polarization, people more likely to cling to their sense of group identity and to regard their own group as under siege, compelling them to rise collectively.

Only 20 years ago, 70 percent of protests demanding systemic political change got it — a figure that had been growing steadily since the 1950s.[56] In the mid-2000s, that trend reversed. Worldwide, protesters' success rate has since plummeted to *only* 30 percent,[57] according to a study[58] by Erica Chenoweth. The decreasing rate of movement effectiveness and the parallel increasing success of governments to defeat them, reflect challenges in the digital space, but also a lowering degree of organizational base and power. Leaderless civil resistance may more easily duck government surveillance, and with the help of social media, may be able to mobilize people on the streets. Yet, on the other hand, grand-scale campaigns with strong leadership and organization will more easily be able to coordinate action; develop a vision; communicate messages; enforce norms; and preserve the organizational muscle needed to sustain movements over longer periods.

5. Who Are the Democratic and Redistributive Agents in Civil Society?

Much of civil society's regular work became a great deal harder during the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic as crucial activities were put on hold, governments around the world called for national unity, and the communities served by civil society were put on lockdown. Yet, while some regimes took advantage of emergency rules and regulation to silence activists, suppress opposition, censor criticisms or take control of the media, civil society activities soon picked up again. Considerable amounts of solidarity action and social services, as well as political mobilization and information dissemination was done through NGOs, organizations, and social movements. The volunteer sector which already made up a significant portion of national labor markets and gross domestic products before the pandemic became the only source of assistance for desperate people in many countries (UNDP 2015[59]). The watchdog role of civil society organizations became crucial in many places. Workers struggles picked up with work stoppages in Hong Kong, New York,[60] and Paris, for example. Amazon and Instacart workers went on strike in the US and France.[61] At the same time, massive investments were made by large unions in advocacy and negotiations to ensure rescue packages for corporations and their workforce, as well as to provide aid to prevent layoffs of workers. Movements for social justice have been particularly active[62] during the pandemic with activists focusing on defending workers' rights; mutual aid and solidarity; monitoring policymakers; and popular education about the pandemic.

As life returns to normal, it will also be a 'new normal' for civil society. The issues and fights for lowering the gap will be more pressing. Struggles for inclusion will be under more pressure. Leaders' temptation to crush down on civic space will likely be more desperate. Civil society will still provide opportunities to bring people and communities together for collection action and to mobilize society to voice demands and concerns. It is potentially an important participatory learning platform, teaching people skills in joint decision-making, and in shaping values and attitudes. It can provide platforms for communication, dialogue, as well as for protest and mobilization. Yet, while the neo-Gramscian and neo-Tocquevillian portrayals of civil society that dominated academic and political work from the late 1980s and 1990s continue to frame public discussions of civil society and democracy, at least in the West, the discourse about civil society needs to change. Civil society is complex, multifaceted, and fragmented. It does not only, or mainly, include democratizing or consolidating organizations. It entails virtually all kinds of activities: collective strikes and stay-aways with one set of demands; the lonely demonstrator with a whole list of them, as well as the collective Occupy movement where people were invited to protest about each of their own individual demands. It contains pro-choice and pro-life protests; the climate movement; as well as those demonstrating to protect the oil and gas sector; the pro-LGBTQ+ rights and anti-LGBTQ+ movements, etc. Civil society is, in other words, as broad and wide as the number of opinions about our world. While many organizations in civil society are fighting good causes, delivering needed services, and representing voices that otherwise would not have easily been heard, we need to be clearer on the kinds of organizations we need and want to support, and for what purposes.

There are few attempts at specifying the kind of civil society activity most constructive for good governance or for redistribution. There are similarly few initiatives to define the civil from the uncivil part of civil society or to identify the various kinds and categories of civil society organizations in global aid statistics or development aid. Without this, it will remain difficult to assess the role of civil society and understand how civil society can operate in what seems to be contradictory ways, compared to original "Tocquevillian thinking". Yet, with the increasing, needed, and legitimate calls for civic space and civil society to participate in social dialogue and contracts, as well as in national and transnational partnerships[63], we need to start asking new questions about the character and types of civic society representation and who they actually represent. All those legitimately calling for civil society to play a constructive role in democratization processes and campaigns to lower inequality and polarization, should also pay attention to Chenoweth's[64] view of movements' decreasing success rates being linked to governments having become better at suppressing them, but also that the movements themselves are smaller (than their historical counterparts); them relying more on street protests than on general strikes and other types of broad mass non-cooperation; and them tending to embrace "leaderless resistance" instead of establishing accountable leadership than can help with coordination, strategy, and discipline.

Purely functional organization of civil society will, as Lewis (2013) underlines, not threaten an authoritarian state or a state in democratic backsliding. It may in fact help the state or governing party to reinforce its grip on society. It is primarily when civil society starts mobilizing on issues in disagreement with the state that things may turn more challenging and the relationship with the state more threatening. Particularly when civil society starts *organizing* people into more long-term agendas and structures on causes that go against the interests of the state. This is also when there is higher chance of succeeding with democratic demands and states have higher chance of reaching a societal base. The key reasons why movements generally have become less successful, are according to Chenoweth (2021), linked to the campaigns themselves. While some of them, like the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, have mobilized large gatherings, they are smaller (relative to populations) and less inclusive than some of the previous grand-scale movements like the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s in the US or the First Intifada in the late 1980s in Palestine. Furthermore, they often rely on mass demonstrations in the streets which are easily mobilized through social media, but less effective for large-scale strikes, stay-aways, boycotts, and other tools that may create long-term and larger pressures. For the latter, a different kind and level of organization-building is required. One that builds leadership and coordination. Membership and accountability. Branch structures, meetings, and discussions. One that is developed over time. Bottom-up and democratically.

Mass mobilization fades over time. The low success of the mass protest during the Arab Spring may have been caused both by the durability of authoritarian systems, but also by a lack of strong, well-organized organizations on the side of civil society. The Arab Spring was first and foremost a wave of mobilization lacking the backbone of independent organizations. The need to *build* the movement and organize debates, meetings, branches, forums, and information guides has also become high on the agenda lately for Black Lives Matter in the US for similar reasons[65]. Johansson and Vintagen suggest[66] long-term social or political change happen more frequently by setting up and maintaining alternative practices than by protest in the streets or armed revolutions. And Bernhard argues[67] that it was the countries in Eastern Europe that had some extent of independent civil society organization and mobilization after the post-1989 transition that managed also to block excessive nomenklatura elite conversion of communist-era power resources into private assets and political power in the post-communist era.[68]

Strong civic organization and campaigns do not necessarily or primarily start by fundraising or large-scale mobilization initiatives, but has more often developed out of citizen's actions and solidarity at the local level or from specific interest groups. The latter is well-known, the former needs to receive more recognition. Local citizens' solidarity networks and initiatives may be the seeds of future democratic revolutions and processes. In Mexico, citizens' solidarity after the 1985 earthquake is seen by many as the beginning of the democratization process (Zermeño et al. 2002). Bayat (2010) likewise pinpoints to how local solidarity and resistance in neighborhoods all over the Arab world became the foundation upon which the 2011 revolutions rose up. And the civic mobilization that started with humanitarian aims after the 2008 Nargis cyclone in Burma became the roots of the civil society organizations that later mobilized resistance against military rule.

Information and communication technologies have opened up new spaces[69] for civil society action, which has enabled the growth of networks across geographical, as well as previous social and physical divides. Beissinger (2017) demonstrates,[70] however, that while new technologies have reduced the costs of collective action and contributed to the development of a new "virtual civil society", this becomes vulnerable without traditional models of organizing.[71] Without actual organizations, such virtual networks make it difficult to sustain durable protest dynamics. They introduce, in his view, high levels of volatility and uncertainty that reinforce difficulties in developing coherent strategies, ideological programs, and stable leadership, all of which are necessary to effectively confront non-democratic regimes. In order for new civic organizations to build strength and representation, virtual networks and activities need to be built on top of and be an *extended* part of civil society´s organizing and strategic organization-building.

There are tools available to help organize and build strong new modern organizations with, for example, tech hubs found across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Some of them are already deeply involved in local solutions for citizen participation. More collaboration and strengthening of coordination between civil society organizations would also be positive. In many countries, organizations appear to work independently[72] and in isolation, with minimal

coordination with others (CSPPS 2020). Civil society organizations also need to gain public support through alliances with media; collaborate with academia for evidence-based arguments; coordinate with faith-based institutions to spread messages more widely through trusted channels; and build partnerships with regional and international platforms. Yet, most important is to again build resilience through organizational or "institutional" muscles.

6. Civil Society-State Relations

Governance and development, as well as reset and recovery will all depend on the type of civil society a country has and the relations between it and the state; i.e. the kind of social contracts developing.

Civil society is relevant for societal recovery in several ways. It can ensure provision of basic services that the state is unable to deliver, and that the corporate sector sees as unprofitable. The past months of civil society mobilization during the pandemic has demonstrated this clearly. Civil society may also push for redistribution of resources and wealth through mobilization, strikes, protests, and collective power. Civil society can often serve as a watchdog, expressing popular sentiments and views which may not always be welcome for governments, but it will still inform the public and will, usefully, take the temperature of people´s views and perspectives between elections.

Several countries have well-established relations with civil society and have systems or social dialogue processes in place in which delivering in certain sectors are reliant on consultation and/or negotiations with civil society representing key constituencies. Examples are found[73] in South Korea, South Africa, several Latin American countries, and the Nordic countries, where such partnerships have brought growth, development, redistribution, and have hindered major conflicts. The relationships have different shapes and strengths, but are characterized by institutionalized dialogue between governments and civil society. In the Republic of Korea, major policy initiatives, like the 'New Deal' implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, was negotiated with civil society organizations. In South Africa, civil society organizations have an established place in the institutional political architecture, such as in the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC). In Latin American countries like Costa Rica, dialogue is established with civil society organizations. Popular consultations[74] with civil society are currently being tested in Mexico. In the Nordic countries, trade unions, employers' associations, and other civil society groupings are part of well-established social dialogue processes[75] that formed the pillars of the welfare states developed after WWII. Likewise, Fernandes and Branco[76] show how equality outcomes are enhanced by state/civil society linkages in Portugal, and Ekiert, Kubik, and Wentze[77] show how the inability of the state to check growing market inequality after the fall of communism in Poland was attenuated by the actions of civil society.

Civil society has also proven its ability to play a key role in peacebuilding processes[78] by bringing broader information, greater public and popular representation to the negotiations table, as well as helping to implement peace agreements afterwards. In Sudan, civil society was part of the peace negotiations that lead to the Doha Peace Agreement in 2009 and civil society organizations later mobilized[79] for the 2019 transition ousting president Bashir[80] and establishing civilian rule (until Nov. 2021). In Colombia, civil society was part of the negotiations[81] leading to the 2016 peace agreement with FARC. In Tunisia, civil society mobilized[82] and became an essential part of the political peace talks, played a role in rescuing Constitutional negotiations after the Jasmine Revolution and the fall of Ben Ali's rule in 2011. Their efforts led to the Tunisian Quartet being awarded the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize.[83] Many years before, South Africa's civil society led not only the struggle against the apartheid regime and but also process of establishing key institutions managing the transition in the 1990s, such as the Peace Accord and peace committees operating all over the country.

Governments aiming for good governance need a well-organized civil society to give them reliable and representative information and viewpoints, to help provide services, and to build trust and social cohesion. Many countries currently

suffer from deficits of trust in government, institutions, and leaders. Democracies generally do not die by coups these days, but through the steady degradation of trust, civil liberties, and the rule of law. It is the democracies with weak constraints on power, i.e. weakly organized civil societies, that are most likely to break down. In the absence of organizations, political challenges, and mobilization from below, who? will seldom have the credibility and strength to force political change, but the protests may end up in anarchy and other forces jumping in to take advantage of the situation. The big problem for leaders tempted to suppress democracy is that prairie fire mobilization may cause a lot of damage. One event, such as a murder of a leader or a clearly identified victim of injustice, may mobilize cascades of reactions, like in the mobilization of Black Lives Matter after the murder of George Floyd 2020. Similarly, the Tunisian uprising in 2011 was triggered by a street vendor setting himself on fire in protest against government taxes. The Syrian mass mobilization that later led to full scale civil war was triggered by popular protests against regime violence in one city. In 2021 Colombia, the government recently saw how difficult it was to calm uncoordinated mass protests[84] triggered off by government implemented socio-economic policies.

Civil society is, all in all, the expression of the people – we may not always like what it says, but it is always useful to listen to it, and more often than not to communicate and negotiate with it. There is really no alternative. Civil society does not go away – it becomes friendly and constructive if listened to and treated with respect. If not, it starts marching in the streets.

7. Where Do We Go From Here?

Good governance, sustainable development, inclusion, as well as fair distribution all need a strong, democratic, and independent civil society. We need the robust organizational life that can build resilience, community engagement, and social capital during crises which we have continuously seen during the 2020-21 pandemic and which organizations like the World Health Organization has repeatedly stressed the need for. While NGOs can fill important and transitional needs for expertise, skills, and humanitarian basics, it is first and foremost the independent, democratically organized membership-based organizations that we need for such purposes. It is first and foremost the organizations with membership that can say that they represent constituencies and therefore can serve as a voice for the people – and approach governments on behalf of the people. It is primarily democratic organizations that can train people to use their democratic collective muscle. It is mainly these that can give the most informed input to governments, most effectively channel views, and participate in social dialogue processes that build trust. It is also mostly these organizations' members who are willing to resort to collective action if they are unhappy with the governments or other key actors in society. No surprise, it is also these organizations that seem to be under the most pressure globally. With pressures on civil society organizations, distrust grows and activism in the street increases, which is, in turn, may become a lose-lose for governments. Countries with weak institutions will feel not only the political costs, but also the economic costs and losses of social unrest.[85] No, this is not only a Western phenomenon. Academics arguing that the democratizing impact of civil society is a "Western" phenomenon, overlook the considerable work done in the Global South documenting the impact of strong organized civil society on democratization during the 1980s and 1990s. Not the least, it undervalues the broad mobilization and organizing processes that actually took place, and currently is taking place, in the Global South with the specific purpose and aim of democratization.

Green argues that civil society is at a crossroads:[86] it is buffeted on one side by questions about its relevance, legitimacy, and accountability from governments and their beneficiaries, and on the other side it is having to adjust to a rapidly deteriorating operating environment. Increasing public distrust, combined with uncertainty about the relevance and legitimacy of civil society organizations has called into question civil society effectiveness in bringing about real change (VanDyck, 2017). So while protests and unrest are on the rise in some parts of the world and may

be expected to increase even more as the impact of the pandemic is felt more strongly, it may indeed be time to ask new questions regarding **what types and kinds of organized groups we need and want** if we prefer to see civil society impacting on governance, democracy, and distribution in the most constructive and sustainable ways. In fact, with growing unrest in the streets, we may end up having a choice between organized popular demands led by strong democratic organizations or anarchy.

Figure 4: Core Civil Society Index - Global (VDem 2021)
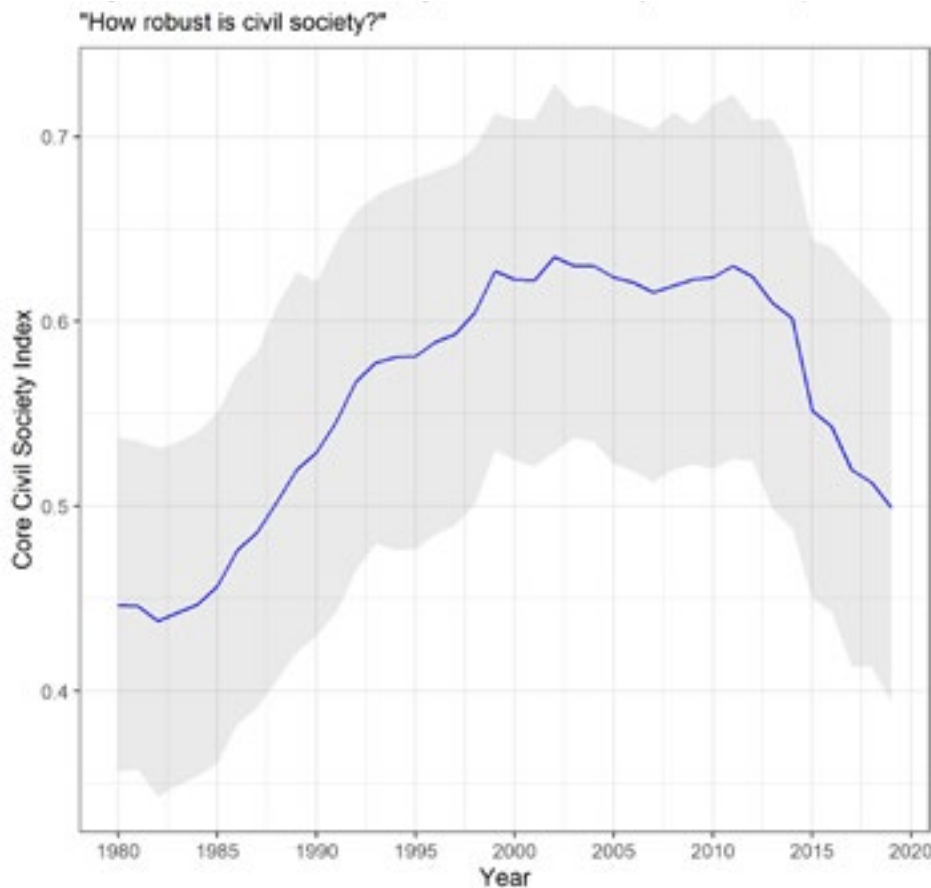
First, we need to **protect civic space**. In several newly democratized and/or transitional countries and regions around the world, such as in Russia, the Horn of Africa, etc., civil society is increasingly confronting major stumbling blocks when it comes to their operations and freedom to organize and mobilize their constituencies. In other countries, such as Myanmar, China, Belarus, Zimbabwe, Turkey, and India people have limited rights to organize, and major political restrictions and suppression is enforced on democratic mobilization. Experts around the world report a similar picture (See Figure 4[87]). The success of popular mass movements over the past decades has led to several governments around the world initiating measures to restrict civil society in order to prevent uprisings. Restrictions reflect increasing creativity ranging from incarceration of leaders to restrictions against receiving foreign funds and to using tax inspectors to suppress overburdened small civil society organizations.

The playbook of "wannabe" dictators seems, according to V-Dem[88] to have been shared widely among leaders in (former) democracies.[89] Their first attacks are often on the freedom to speak and to organize. CIVICUS has linked[90] the closing of civil society to the rise of populism, and repressive governments asserting national sovereignty to the rise of socially conservative forces. The last year has shown us that the temptation to clamp down on what is seen as a demanding and irritating civil society is widely shared, but also that such clamp downs have caused a rising tide of street protests and mobilization. The increasing rise of protest activism and the trend of constraining civil society are interconnected. Regimes are reacting nervously to new forms of civic activism and in turn, as government restrictions bite, activists look for new types of civic organization, mobilization, and activism. While the right to peaceful assembly and protest declined by 14% on average in "autocratizing" countries from 2018 to 2019, resistance has been growing and millions of citizens have demonstrated[91] their commitment to democracy.

The United Nations Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights[92] identified public participation and civic space as one of the key areas to focus the UN's attention on.[93] Respecting and fully embracing **the rights to organize and to assemble** are the best ways to ensure civic space. And while these are part and parcel of the international human rights conventions, the "freedom of association" is one the most overlooked international human rights, as well as one under the most pressure. Protecting civic space is the best long-term investment for national governments and the best unrest and conflict-prevention strategy for global institutions and movements. Lifting this higher up on the UN agenda would be a good investment.

The capacity for democratic action and mobilization does not only depend on the opportunities provided to excluded groups, but to a large extent on civil society's own organizational resources and strategies. Therefore, second, we **need to identify what we mean by civil society** when promoting its place as a pro-democracy actor and/or at the negotiation's table at global and national levels. We need to separate between NGOs, singular mobilizing actors, social movements, and interest organizations when assessing and analyzing expected impacts, aims, and roles. Calling simply for "civil society representation" at global or national levels, or "civil society support" in development aid, risks not only seeming as useless as it would have been rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic, but also that civil society support or representation end up featuring either the wrong, undemocratic or unrepresentative actors.

Some see civil society organizations, social movements, and NGOs as one and the same, but we need to specify what *kind* of organizations or expertise we need before we ask for civil society representation, or expect civil society to have a "democratic impact". There are currently a multitude of different views on what civil society is. The OECD defines civil society and an NGO[94] as any non-profit entity organized to pursue shared objectives, without government-control, including foundations, co-ops, trade unions, and ad-hoc entities set up to collect funds. The World Bank defines civil society similarly broadly.[95] The World Economic Forum includes in their understanding of civil society[96] both formal and informal actors. The EU defines civil society organizations as those organizational structures whose members serve the general interest through a democratic process.

Yet, we need an understanding of civil society that takes into account that civil society does not only include democratic actors but authoritarian and semi-loyal ones, as well. There are several historical situations where active civil societies were tools for authoritarian parties to come to power in democracies with weak liberal traditions. Civil society is a contested space in any democratic society, and particularly during times of democratic crisis, it is a site of battle between forces defending the democratic order and those trying to subvert it. It is in other words not "civil society representation" we should promote at global or national levels, but either specific substance expertise organizations or organizations representing *people´s views* and inputs on specific issues in social dialogue processes or similar. Asking them to commit to and respect human rights, like CIVICUS does of its members, is a good start.

Third, **we need to ensure the collection and dissemination of more and better data** in order to assess the level of respect civil society organizing enjoys and the problems it faces; mobilize civil society participation and membership, as well as identify the "good actors" from the bad; assess civil society strength; monitor developments and map the value civil society has economically and socially. There is currently no single data source that tracks civil society organizational membership sufficiently. We have mappings of ratification of international human rights conventions and of pressures on civic space, but few consistent data sources looking at the rate of organizing. Many organization's own membership records are poor and assessing national or global figures across them is difficult even in the best of circumstances. Some surveys exist, and some of them are good, but questions as to membership and participation in civil society organizations are asked in different ways making comparisons difficult. Simply, we need data not only covering civic space but also better data sets covering the extent to which people are able to use it and for what purposes.

Fourth, we need to soberly think through the types, channels, and scale of **funding for civil society organizations**. International funding to development and humanitarian organizations is considerable and has gaining traction from the 1990s, in 2016 amounting to $1,234 million USD and two years before to $1,414 million USD.[97] Yet, few countries or development agencies have a strategic approach to engaging communities, civil society, or traditional leadership. Several large-scale humanitarian, disarmament, and development organizations are doing impressive and

crucial work, and provide services and expertise that many under-resourced countries cannot match. If programs are aimed at democracy support however, it gets trickier. Professionalized NGOs, which usually receive preferred treatment from international funders, may make great contributions to public policy and deliverables, but often lack roots in the societies they purport to represent. Furthermore, it is currently only a small portion of the global funding that goes through local indigenous organizations, while it is precisely these local organizations that can build collective democratic muscle. Ideally, support should first and foremost go to local organizations and to those who have members or in other ways can legitimately claim to represent the people they are speaking/lobbying on behalf of. The paradox is that many of the organizations with the largest democratic potential are able to, or should best be able to, manage without huge-scale international funding. Large-scale international funding may crumble such potential.

Most importantly, rather than "civil society support or programs," aid agencies, multilateral organizations or governments should be clear on the goals they want to promote. If the goal is to promote democracy or good governance, the programs should be labelled accordingly, with a strategy to achieve the goals, and a plan for the type of civil society organizations that may promote them. All global civil society programs should include strategies specifying the kind of organizations having priority and towards what aims; the portion of funding that should go to local initiatives and actors as well as the maximum portion of an organizational budget that should come from own sources because all successful organizers and civil society leaders know that large-scale external funding can be detrimental to internal accountability and trust. Union organizers, for example, therefore see membership dues not primarily as a financial survival tool, but as a way to develop internal organizational commitment, accountability, and loyalty. Women's organizations like WILPF have found other ways[98] to ensure contributions from members and supporters in order to achieve the same goals.

Fifth, we need **civil society organizations to start organizing** again and to build the organizational muscle that can sustain campaigns beyond mobilizing in the streets. Organizing strategies are needed, both to build organizations and to defend their democratic nature afterwards. Those strategies need to entail aims of accountability, trust-building and representation, and must be built on statutes, structures, and the elections of leaders and leadership; i.e. the whole organizational architecture. In order for us to ensure a higher likelihood that the civil society organizations don't end up being "uncivil", we need to ensure that they are actually representing people and have members; support human rights and preferably good governance; and that they are built up accordingly themselves, i.e. democratically through choosing their leaders, organizing members, etc. Strengthening organizational foundations will remain the key to also build a sense of collective trust. This does not imply that organizations have to be, or become, typical "Western-style" issue-based organizations. There are numerous strong organizations around the world based on broad, ethnic, religious, traditional or political bases with large supporter bases and built up to *represent* their constituencies.

In our current polarized climate, group mobilization often occurs along lines of ethnic, religious or ideological identity, enhanced by sharp inequalities and various forms of exclusion. Rebuilding and defending a civic, democratically-oriented civil society that crosscuts such cleavages and/or that cools tensions between them, is crucial for democracy, development, new social contracts, and conflict prevention, as well as for trust-building and smooth transitions to post-pandemic recovery. The purpose of civil society is not to support governments, but to represent the people – in the streets, in social media, and around negotiating tables. Herein lies also their value to governments, both the benevolent ones and those less so. All in all, the key to sustainable development and more stable democratic regimes may depend on the social organizations in which they are nested. A weak and passive civil society may pose a greater threat to democratic governance than the occasional disruption an active civil society may bring.

Endnotes

1   Rallying poem and phrase during the Arab Spring.

2   Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Scenarios for 2040: Charting the Future Amid Uncertainty." Accessed August 20, 2021. https://www.dni.gov/index.php/gt2040-home/scenarios-for-2040.

3   See, for example, Ekiert, Kubik & Wenzel (in "Civil Society and Three Dimensions of Inequality in Post-1989 Poland" in *Comparative Politics*, April 2017, Vol. 49, No. 3) arguing that civil society has contributed to the consolidation and quality of Polish democracy by reducing political inequality and facilitating civic participation. While the positive role of civil society in the reduction of political and civic inequalities is relatively well documented, its role in reducing economic inequality is harder to determine: it has been found to correspond to lower inequality in long well-established democracies, but less in newly established "third-wave democracies". Bernhard, M. and D.J. Jung show (in "Civil Society and Income Inequality in Post-Communist Eurasia" 2017) that the higher the level of civil society engagement, "at the point of extrication from communism," the more it contributed in the long run to more egalitarian economic outcomes.

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portray a far more nuanced view of civil society and of civil society organizations entangled with the state - "enmeshed together in a complex and multilayered network of material transactions, personal connections, and organizational linkages." Jamal highlights, for example, how civil society organizations have become replica sites same of patron-client, state centralization ties otherwise seen in Palestinian society. Hsu (2010) suggests that, "the people who run Chinese NGOs tend to view the state as a resource-rich conglomeration of competing actors and agencies, and therefore the best source of alliances available for NGOs." Spires suggests that unregistered, grassroots NGOs are tolerated in China because they produce social services that people want, and which are recognized by the state as desirable (Lewis 2013). In Syria, Kawakibi (2013) notes the importance of so-called "GONGOs" in three functional areas of benefit to the state: compensating for reduced state welfare activities as a result of economic reforms; offering structures through which to coopt newly emerging social groups; and attracting foreign funding. Sources: Spires, A. J. 2011. "Contingent symbiosis and civil society in an authoritarian state: Understanding the survival of China's grassroots NGOs." in *American Journal of Sociology*, 117(1): 1–45; Jamal, A. 2007: *Barriers to Democracy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Helliker, K. 2012: Civil society and state-centred struggles, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 30(1), pp. 35–47.

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