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DISSECTING GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY
Values, Actors, Organisational Forms

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Dissecting Global Civil Society

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What are the Features of Global Civil Society?

What we see in global civil society depends on what value lens we use to define it. The trend towards networked organisation may have emancipatory effects, but may also obscure inequalities and clashing values

The rare and intriguing beast, let us say it is an elephant, called global civil society was defined in the first Global Civil Society Yearbook published in 2001 (Oxford University Press, 2001) as "the sphere of ideas, values, institutions, organisations, networks, and individuals located between the family, the state, and the market and operating beyond the confines of national societies, polities, and economies."

So the elephant was a sphere, between certain other entities, and beyond yet others. Looking back on it, I think this definition was not wrong, but unhelpful for practitioners and policy-makers trying to better understand the elephant. Nor was it perhaps the most credible way of making our claim, against those who said it was a mythical beast, that the elephant really exists.

The difficulty is that the elephant lives deep in the jungle of social reality, covers large distances, and tends to defy systematic observation. Hence, I approach it now from a different point of departure. Instead of pretending to approach the elephant with a blank sheet, it is more useful to somewhat systematically describe the different expectations people have of the elephant. Each of us, I suggest, carries a slightly different picture of the elephant in our heads, and what we think we recognize in the forest tends to be a partial or entire match with the elephant in our heads.

Normative Connotations

The term 'civil society' comes with a number of quite different and sometimes contradictory normative connotations, stemming from different parts of its long intellectual history. They include:

Civil society as **social capital**: through frequent association with each other in a variety of networks, *trust* between citizens is built up through a virtuous cycle of repeatedly meeting each other's expectations. This solves collective action problems and improves the well-being of the community and its citizens - a notion inspired by de Tocqueville and Putnam.

Civil society as citizens **active in public affairs**:rather than just being producers and consumers, civil society denotes people's willingness to give time and attention to engagement in public affairs for the common good.

Civil society as **non-violent** and resisting violence: it constitutes the recognition that resolving conflict through non-violent means is preferable to the use of force, and engages in non-violent and anti-violent collective action. Inspired by Gandhi and peace movements.

Civil society as **fostering public debate**: this sees civil society as synonymous with the public sphere. In this sphere, through the media and venues of public debate such as town hall meetings,

citizens debate each other with proposals for the public good, and through these deliberations better policy proposals are formulated, which informs formal politics. Inspired by Habermas.

Civil society as **counter-hegemony**: while civil society is in part a hegemonic project of designing and disseminating ideologies that justify individual and collective differences in power and wealth, this sphere also gives space to doing the opposite: formulating and disseminating ideologies that challenge the powerful and champion the marginalised, through cultural institutions such as the media, churches, associations or trade unions. Initially one creates one's own counter-hegemonic institutions, but eventually the project is to 'overwhelm' the mainstream. Inspired by Gramsci.

The newer term 'global civil society', rather than just conjuring up abstract ideas about being between something and beyond something else, has yet more normative connotations:

A cosmopolitan view: being part of a **global imagined community**, a sense of connection and solidarity.

A normative belief **in human rights and/or global social justice** rather than just civil rights and fair distribution for citizens of one's own state.

A belief in global and **shared responsibility for the earth**. Environmentalists in particular, however locally active, have early on tended to stress the necessarily transnational and even global nature of their cause, and the necessity for 'global solutions'.

Global **resistance against hegemony**: challenging the winners, championing the losers, of globalisation.

Normative Ideal Types

On the basis of the described features, each one of us could probably mix-and-match our own favourite normative flavour of global civil society. Nonetheless, it is possible to simplify and abstract a few ideal typical normative definitions of global civil society. I distinguish the following four.

The **neoliberal version**: global civil society as the sphere, or the collection of actors, that provides social services more flexibly, effectively and efficiently than states can do.

The **liberal version**: global civil society as the sphere, or the collection of actors, furthering progressive change, or in other words renegotiating the global social contract, by holding global power-holders accountable to human rights and environmental values.

The **radical version**: global civil society as the arena, or the collection of actors, resisting global capitalism and/or neo-imperial hegemony through collective action.

The **post-modern version**: if we accept the western, neo-colonial concept of global civil society at all, it is the arena or collection of actors in (uneven) contestation from a plurality of normative perspectives, not engaged in any one single master project.

While we still all hold to our own normative version, I think a new consensus is emerging with respect to what might be called 'actually existing global civil society'. Western actors in global civil society, donors, and academics studying the phenomenon are all increasingly coming to the recognition that, whatever normative preference they may have, the post-modern version is an empirical reality. Transnational societal actors include those whose ideology is exclusivist on an ethnic or religious basis, those who do not reject violence, and those who are covertly profit-oriented. Trying to distinguish 'good' from 'bad' or civil society from uncivil society on the basis of any moral frame may not do justice to the subtlety and complexity of social reality.

How do we Measure Global Civil Society?

These normative reflections would not have much relevance if global civil society was a marginal phenomenon in world politics. Hence, we might want to find out 'how big' global civil society is, by measuring it. I have increasingly come to the conclusion that this is not, in fact, possible. What we know how to measure, is International NGOs (International Non-Governmental Organizations). Doing this is not a completely useless exercise. It may throw light on some surprising facts, such as: The number of international NGOs is still growing fairly fast, from 10,140 in 1990; to13,119 in 2000, to 14, 675 in 2008.

That the percentage of international NGO meetings held in each continent has been almost completely constant between 1993 and 2005: approximately 60% are held in Europe, 20% in the Americas, 15% in Asia, 5% in Africa and 3% in Australia and the Pacific. There turns out to be no perceptible shift to the South in this timespan.

Membership density of international NGOs denotes the number of INGOs operating in that country per one million inhabitants. These figures give the lie to simplified views of 'the West' or 'the South' as most NGO-ised. In the US there are 14 INGOs per one million people, in Lebanon there are 294, in Botswana 436 and in Iceland a whopping 6,353.

But the whole "new actors" debate stems from the realisation that counting NGOs (non-governmental organizations) , whether national or international ones, does not help much in understanding who are significant civil society actors, either from a power perspective, or from any value perspective. Counting international NGOs, and particularly adding up their total annual turn-over, may come closest to giving us a portrait of the neo-liberal version, but even that is not a particularly good likeness.

Other strategies have been attempted to measure manifestations of civil society or global civil society, for instance by counting demonstrations, strikes, petitions or internet forums. But these are much harder to measure on a global scale and still give us only a very partial picture. Civil society

manifestations in authoritarian or conflict situations can probably only be researched at micro-level with qualitative, contextual methods.

Accepting this while still continuing to employ the concept 'global civil society' entails having to face the fact that we do not know exactly what we are talking about. It also means that, absent data to the contrary, it can easily be discursively narrowed down to becoming identical with our preferred normative interpretation. Accusations of such abuse have especially been levelled at the liberal version by post-modernists who see in it a covert hegemonic project to impose western values.

After this extended confession about our collective ignorance about the sphere of global civil society as a whole, I will nonetheless attempt to make a few more specific remarks about what might constitute 'new trends and new actors' within it.

What are the New Actors?

Not at all New Actors

Some of the so-called 'new actors' in global civil society are in fact as old as the hills. They have just ended up in this category because they have been newly discovered by western development agencies who have begun to recognise the need to look beyond the NGO form. They include for instance religious leaders or religious venues which may or may not be connected to recognised non-profit entities. Or they can be tribal networks or charitable institutions such as *waqf*. Another such actor is the 'non-governmental individual'. Such civil society personalities, including artists and public intellectuals, have always existed and played important roles in their own political environments. But international donors have only recently begun to experiment with funding individuals whose values they recognise, for instance under the heading of 'individuals at risk'.

NGO Mimics

Some of the so-called new actors are those who mimic, for different reasons of their own, the organisational form of NGOs. They are in this sense testimony to the success of the NGO format, especially in functioning according to the neoliberal and liberal models. This is aptly illustrated by an anecdote found on the back cover of Global Civil Society 2004/5: Bill Clinton relates (after stepping down from the presidency) how he looked in the mirror while shaving and thought to himself 'Wow, I am an NGO'. Apart from this RESTANGO (retired statesman's NGO), this group includes BINGOs, GONGOs, FLANGOs and FLAMINGOs.

BINGOs are business interest NGOs, also known in the US as astroturf (a play on the word grassroots). They are particularly prevalent in environmental fora, propounding the view that sustainable solutions are best implemented by and with the market.

GONGOs, government-organised NGOs, are increasingly prevalent in particular in authoritarian states, from the Middle East to China. They have various functions. First, they can be a genuine expression of the view also widely held in democracies, that NGOs are better at delivering social services than state bureaucracies. Second they can be convenient vehicles for receiving development aid or other donations from foreign institutions who are unwilling to give directly to the state. Third, they may be international window-dressing, showing for instance that a 'human rights NGO' can operate in the country, while simultaneously squeezing the space for genuine expressions of civil society. But as such, they may nonetheless under some circumstances have the potential to become precisely what they are pretending to be: spaces for independent thought, and perhaps even speech. FLANGOs or first lady NGOs are a particular version of this species. There is as yet very little research on GONGOs, which are on the agenda of the Hivos Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia.

Finally the FLAMINGO, the fly-by-night or flavour-of-the-month NGO, is an impostor organisation posing as an NGO and writing funding proposals simply to attract donor funding. This type is probably found in all developmental settings, but is particularly associated with humanitarian disasters such as the Indian Ocean tsunami.

While we would probably like, for the sake of definitional purity, to keep these types outside our definition of global civil society, it is necessary to be aware that these actors too have socio-political effects on their environment. Even the FLAMINGOs undoubtedly have such effects in terms of the trust populations who have experience of them put into other civil society actors they come across.

New Actors Associated With Globalisation Processes

Finally, there is a category of actors and phenomena that are relatively new, and that most of us would recognise as belonging to global civil society. Their emergence relates to different processes of globalisation.

First, there are actors related to migration. These include diaspora groups, which may be active in the home country, in the host country, or they may indeed be active in one of these realms to achieve ends in the other. They also include various types of 'sans-papiers' movements. In the post-modern version of global civil society, we would have to recognise anti-immigrant groups, in Europe, North America and Australia, but also for instance in South Africa, as one of the rising phenomena in this category.

Secondly, there are actors and phenomena that have been able to emerge thanks to the new information and communication technology. These include Internet forums, social networks such as Facebook, videosites such as Youtube, bloggers, and rapid mobilisation via mobile phone. There is some research emerging on such phenomena, but it is challenged to keep up with fast-movement developments in this field.

This 'new actors' category may also, more controversially, include a category of activities that blurs the boundary between for-profit and normative projects. Examples of such 'venture philanthropy' activities, recently criticised in a book by Mike Edwards include the financing of profitable movies with a message, the sale of solar-powered flashlights, or the development of software that allows human rights activists to automatically encrypt abuse-related information.

What are the Trends?

So what are the trends? Trends could be a catch-all category, but I will use it to make a brief point about language, and a slightly more comprehensive one about an important shift in organisational structure.

Always in Search of a Better Term

The first point relates specifically to those actors in global civil society who are engaged in funding other global civil society actors, particularly across borders. They seem to be continuously in search of better terms to describe themselves, what they do, and who they fund. Most are now deeply uncomfortable with the notion of being a charity, or even a donor. Some are even in denial about being an NGO. One of the biggest such organisations, Oxfam GB, for instance describes itself on its website as "a vibrant global movement of passionate, dedicated people fighting poverty together."

Those who are funded cannot be called beneficiaries or subcontractors. Moreover, these 'partners' are often no longer called NGOs, even though in the vast majority of cases they are, if only for the simple reason that financial transfers are most easily made to registered non-profits. For a while they were 'civil society organisations', but perhaps in response to the 'recognition of the postmodern reality' described above, that term too seems to be going out of fashion. Funders are now looking for 'civic driven change', or 'agents of change'. These terms have the very same content-free vanilla flavour as a certain recent presidential candidate's campaign for 'change we can believe in'.

I suspect that the constant change of terms is a symptom of a deeper discomfort, on the part of western donor organisations, about the political economy of the aid industry, and a related reluctance to spell out very clearly to their own sources of funding and beneficiaries alike what values they stand for, and which ones they do not espouse.

But the final trend I want to discuss in part two of this survey, is the gradual shift, among many of the formally organised actors of global civil society, from a hierarchic to a networked form of organisation.

From Hierarchies to Networks

There are probably different origins of the network form. One I would mention would be in west European women's movements from the 1960s and 1970s onwards. In their struggle against all forms of patriarchy, they also challenged the quintessential organisational form of the twentieth century, the pyramid structure, which can be seen as inspired by the patriarchal extended family. They organised instead as networks, without clear leadership roles. A very different origin of the network form is with the early computer geeks who explored open source code and accidentally invented the Internet. Both in turn inspired the anti-capitalist movement of the early 21st century that made much of its networked, leaderless nature. The idea of network as opposed to hierarchy has even found a small following in the corporate sector, especially with ICT and new technology companies.

But it has been especially influential in global civil society, where thousands of platforms, networks and coalitions have been born in the last decade or two.
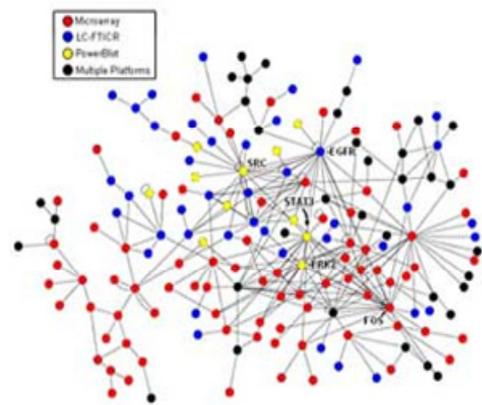
The move from a hierarchical or Fordist to a network model, in which all actors are nodes, theoretically equal but differentially connected, is best rendered by the illustration below:

Figure 1

20th century family/state/company:
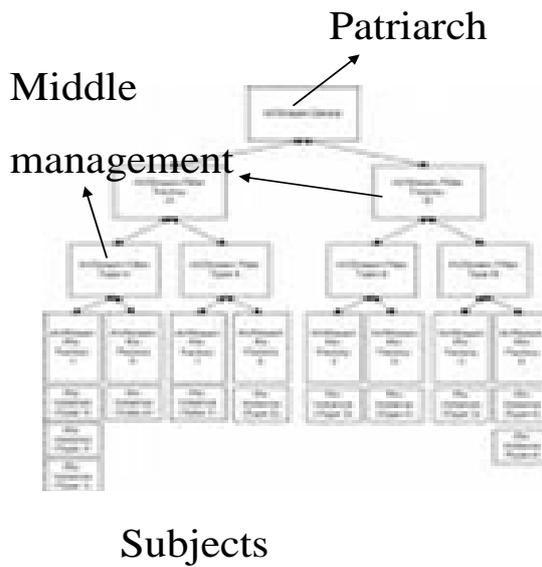
21st century identity/ governance/entrepreneurship:

The move to networks partly reflects a real shift in practices, but it is also a shift in *thinking* about what are the most efficient and ethical ways of working. The pyramid structure and the network are each associated with a set of mutually opposed connotations, as follows:

Pyramid:	Network:
Vertical	Horizontal
Rigid	Flexible
Info- hoarding	Info-sharing
Clique	Strength of weak ties

I want to invite you to consider this shift a little critically. It is certainly also possible to give an alternative reading to the differences, as follows:

Pyramid:	Network:
Predictable	Volatile
Sustainable	Transient
Transparent	Opaque

Research by Jordan and Van Tuijl (2001), Taschereau and Bolger (2006) and Carpenter (2007) suggests that transnational activist networks sometimes obscure rather than resolve tensions. These include differences of opinion over strategy, different points of departure in terms of norms and values, uneven information flows, and of course power differentials. Neither a demand for 'representation' nor the concept of 'accountability' quite captures the nature of these tensions. Most successful networks regularly adapt their structure in order to try and manage, if not necessarily resolve, them.

Charli Carpenter has discovered another important problem with networks. Intuitively, we assume that a problem, when felt in different locations and requiring policy change at different levels, may lead to the emergence of a transnational activist network. However, Carpenter has shown that powerful nodes in existing networks play a key role in brokering which issues become global campaigns and which do not. Organisations and individuals within the networks play roles as 'issue entrepreneurs', but also as gatekeepers. Her important example is that of children born of rape. She has documented that the vulnerability of these children is actually a considerable problem in many post-conflict situations, but it has not become framed as a 'global issue'. She postulates that this is because the issue did not fit with the concerns of existing women's and child rights networks, and goes so far as to suggest that instead of issues creating networks, it is networks that create the issues!

Summary and Conclusions

What we see in global civil society depends on what value lens we use to define global civil society. The lens used by participants, donors, and academics again shapes social reality, but not always in the way we expect.

There is now a broad acceptance that counting the number of NGOs, globally or in a particular country, is not a particularly meaningful measure of social reality whatever definition of (global) civil society one uses, unless it is a tautological one, from which no further implication can be drawn for social change. Other measures, of 'civility' or 'mobilisation', or 'space' are also controversial. Are we willing to abandon broad assessments of quality and quantity of civil society in favour of contextualised micro-understandings? If so, academics and funders alike must think through the policy implications of doing so.

The 'new actors' discussed here include the following categories: the old but newly visible, mimickers of NGOs, and the really new, connected to processes of globalisation, in particular migration and borderless information and communication technologies. They all have socio-political effects on their environment, but no decontextualised assumptions can be made about the nature of those effects.
The fashion for networks and networking as an organisational mode does not in itself create equality, or shared values. It may increase the space for emancipation and dialogue, but it may also obscure inequalities and value clashes. It may even agitate against getting important new issues onto global policy agendas. Both practitioners and academics must be careful not to take the ostensible openness and horizontality of the network form at face value, but be alert to potentially very different dynamics underneath.

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About the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia

The paper is produced in the framework of the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Syria and Iran can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this.

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