

Global Civil Society

Written by Raffaele Marchetti

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RAFFAELE MARCHETTI, DEC 28 2016

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Patterns of globalisation have challenged the exclusivity of states as actors in international affairs. Globalisation links distant communities and opens up spaces for new social actors. Among the non-state actors benefiting from this change are public-interest-orientated non-governmental actors, often known as civil society groups. Alongside the state, profit-orientated corporate actors and international governmental organisations, these civil society groups complete the mosaic of actors on the international stage.

The standard definition of civil society identifies it as the space outside of government, family and market. A place in which individuals and collective organisations advance allegedly common interests. Civil society organisations can include community groups, non-governmental organisations, social movements, labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organisations, faith-based organisations, media operators, academia, diaspora groups, lobby and consultancy groups, think tanks and research centres, professional associations, and foundations. Political parties and private companies can also be counted as borderline cases. The presence of civil society organisations in international affairs has become increasingly relevant. They have played a role in agenda setting, international law-making and diplomacy. Further, they have been involved in the implementation and monitoring of a number of crucial global issues. These range from trade to development and poverty reduction, from democratic governance to human rights, from peace to the environment, and from security to the information society. Because of these reasons, international relations cannot be fully captured without taking into account the actions of civil society organisations.

Different theoretical perspectives can be used to interpret global civil society. Liberals may understand it as the actor that provides a bottom-up contribution to the effectiveness and legitimacy of the international system as a whole. In essence, it is democracy in action as power is being held to account by the populace. Realists, however, may interpret global civil society as a tool used by the most powerful states to advance their ultimate interests abroad, often promoting and popularising ideas that are key to the national interest. Marxists may see global civil society as political vanguards that can spread a different world view that challenges the dominant order. Finally, some even argue that the concept of civil society as a sphere distinct from the family, state and market remains a Western concept that does not apply easily to societies where the boundaries between these spheres are more blurred. It is useful to keep these various perspectives in mind as you read through the chapter.

Conditions for transnational activism

The activism of global civil society groups has been facilitated by a number of specific conditions. First, a number of international organisations have supported the inclusion of civil society actors within international decision-making. For example, the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro provided a means for previously scattered groups to meet and create common platforms and networks. The European Union has followed a similar approach by integrating different types of civil society organisations within its governance mechanisms. Second, the state’s priorities for the allocation of resources changed in the 1980s and 1990s due to a trend towards the privatisation of industries. In that climate, it was common to see state-owned enterprises (such as utilities) being sold off to private companies. For that reason, in many Western nations, the state’s overall role in public affairs was reduced. In this context, civil society

Global Civil Society

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organisations were able to subcontract many functions from the state and take up new roles as service providers. Third, the globalisation process has generated a sense of common purpose among civil society actors. This has been a trigger for internal unification – increasing the sense of solidarity among civil society organisations. It has also united the groups that want to highlight the negative sides of globalisation. Finally, through the internet, groups from different parts of the world have been able to familiarise themselves with other political realities, like-minded organisations, and alternative forms of action. In this way, they have been able to increase their political know-how and their ability to join forces in addressing common targets.

The wider international system itself has offered an environment conducive to the development of these kinds of activities. By forming transnational networks, civil society organisations have used their leverage at the international level to achieve notable results. A transnational network can be defined as a permanent co-ordination between different civil society organisations (and sometimes individuals), located in several countries, collectively focused on a specific global issue. Major past examples are the Jubilee 2000 campaign, which worked through the 1990s to induce creditor governments and the International Monetary Fund to take steps toward debt relief for highly indebted poor countries. Another is the campaign to ban landmines, which led to the intergovernmental conference in Ottawa where the Mine Ban Treaty was signed in 1997. Ongoing campaigns, to mention a few, include mobilisation on environmental justice, gender recognition, LGBT rights and food security.

Global civil society as a response to transnational exclusion

In today's complex world, traditional institutions have struggled to provide effective and legitimate responses to global issues such as climate change, financial instability, disease epidemics, intercultural violence and global inequalities. As a response to these shortcomings, forms of so-called multi-level, stakeholder governance have been established that involve a combination of public and private actors. Civil society action at the international level is predominantly focused on building political frameworks with embedded democratic accountability. At present, most global governance bodies suffer from accountability deficits – that is, they lack the traditional formal mechanisms of democratic accountability that are found in states, such as popularly elected leaders, parliamentary oversight, and non-partisan courts. Instead, the executive councils of global regulatory bodies are mainly composed of bureaucrats who are far removed from the situations that are directly affected by the decisions they take. People in peripheral geographical areas and in marginalised sections of society are especially deprived of recognition, voice and influence in most contexts of global governance as it is currently practised. An apt depiction of such an international system is to describe it as characterised by 'transnational exclusion'.

In recent decades most global regulatory bodies have begun to develop closer relations with civil society organisations precisely in order to fill this legitimacy gap. For example, the Committee on World Food Security within the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation has reserved seats for different types of organisations, including non-governmental organisations and social movements, research centres, financial institutions, private sector associations and private philanthropic foundations. While the role of civil society organisations in these contexts is predominantly based on a consultative status, they allow the civil society organisations to have a seat at the table.

Given their need to balance a deeper impact on society with greater legitimacy, global governance institutions have been under pressure to be more inclusive and attentive to the political demands coming from below. Thanks to such dynamics, civil society actors have managed to increase their access to international agenda-setting, decision-making, monitoring and implementation in relation to global issues. At the same time, the challenge to the inclusion of civil society actors in global governance mechanisms remains significant. New institutional structures are continually emerging and the challenge in terms of integration is therefore endlessly renewed. New institutional filters are created and civil society actors have to constantly re-focus and adapt to new circumstances. An example is provided by the announcement in 2009 that the main economic council of wealthy nations would shift from the G-8 to the G-20 format. The G-20 meets annually and is composed of 19 states plus the European Union. Together its members account for roughly 80 per cent of the world's trade. In this instance, civil society activists have been lagging behind: activism around the G-8 was intense, but the meetings of the G-20 have only recently attracted a similar level of attention.

Global Civil Society

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Values promotion and creating change

At the core of the dynamics leading to the emergence of transnational activism is the perception of the possibility of change in the area of one specific global issue. This might arise due to a new issue becoming significant or the re-interpretation of a long-standing issue. Ultimately, the key feature of transnational activism in global governance is precisely its stubborn attempt to influence the normative battle on the right and legitimate interpretation of crucial global issues. In this perspective, civil society organisations should be seen not only as traditional problem solvers (providing solutions that governments are less suited to delivering) but also as problem generators (placing new problematic issues on the international agenda). While the perception of an unjust situation necessarily constitutes a precondition for action, it is only when the actor recognises the possibility of having a positive impact on such a situation that mobilisation may start. Two elements are necessary for such mobilisation: conceptualisation and political commitment.

Transnational mobilisation on global issues should be interpreted as the result of several steps. A crucial challenge for any transnational network is to present the issue at stake in such a way that it is perceived as problematic, urgent and also soluble. Think, for instance, of the case of feminism. Through the action of a number of feminist movements, beginning with the suffragettes in the late nineteenth century, the traditional role of women was challenged and eventually replaced by a new egalitarian position entitling women to have equal standing in society. The first step in cross-border mobilisations is therefore the production of knowledge and the creation of 'frames' through which the issue at stake can be correctly interpreted.

A second step consists of the external dissemination and strategic use of such knowledge. This is a crucial stage as it is the point at which information acquires a fully public dimension – and therefore political significance. Global public opinion needs to be attracted and its imagination captured for framing the terms of the conflict in such a way that the issue at stake becomes the focus of a general interest requiring public engagement. Dissemination often passes through scientific channels. When networks become active players in the communities of experts on global issues, they tend to be perceived by public opinion as credible sources of information and this increases their influence on policymaking. However, dissemination can also be executed through other forms, including public action such as mass protests.

In order to successfully promote change a third step is necessary. The task here consists in gaining a recognised role in the public sphere as a rightful advocate of general interests. To the question 'In whose name do you speak?', transnational networks need to offer a response that enables them to claim representation of interests that are wider than just those of a small group. Once transnational networks succeed in shaping a challenge associated to a particular global issue, the political opportunity for mobilising and network building arises.

Although success necessarily depends on international circumstances, national conditions often play an important role in the rise of global social movements. In national contexts, civil society organisations are rooted in a web of social relations and common identities. They have access to important resources (such as people and money) but operate in highly formalised political systems that shape and constrain their mobilisation and impact through a number of political filters. For instance, while democratic countries tend to leave space for activism, the room for manoeuvre in countries ruled by other kinds of regime may be more limited. At the global level, however, there are few such restrictions. This factor widens the options for political action. In fact, transnational networks may help increase the political opportunities that are present in national contexts; they often perform a facilitating role, providing space for actors who are usually voiceless and excluded. Transnational networks can also amplify local voices by setting them in the context of global issues and policies, thus strengthening local or national activism.

Transnational networks can therefore be understood as organisational responses to the new global socio-political environment in which political opportunities on the one hand and scarce resources (finance, knowledge, etc.) on the other create conditions in which a network structure can perform better than other organisational forms. As this combination is inherently contingent, transnational networks tend to have a limited political life. On the one hand, networks are created in response to a specific issue; it is difficult to adapt them to a different issue and in many cases easier to simply create a new network. On the other hand, social movements and especially networks are cyclical

Global Civil Society

Written by Raffaele Marchetti

phenomena. The interaction between the set of values shared by social movements and global political opportunities leads to the emergence of different projects of political change, reflecting also the heterogeneity of actors – for instance, balancing reformist with more radical attitudes. Individual networks, therefore, fit a specific set of conditions – internal and external to global movements – but when some of them change, the factors that led to their rise may dissolve, mobilisation may decline rapidly and networks are unlikely to maintain their significance unless they adapt their strategy and at times their own identity to the new political contexts.

Contested legitimacy

While it is clear that civil society organisations cannot aim at replacing the traditional channels of political representation, it is recognised that they often play a key role in ‘broadcasting’ viewpoints that struggle to be included in the political agenda. From the activist perspective the issue of political representation should not be interpreted as a matter of who they represent but, rather, what they aim to represent. It is the issues they tackle and the values they seek to uphold that are crucial – possibly more than their constituencies. Civil society organisations usually claim to advance the public interest. While it may not be clear what the public interest is with regard to many global issues, the ambition of civil society is, as argued above, to contribute within the normative battlefield of global public opinion. To explore the issue of legitimacy we can look at the two extremes of the civil society spectrum – the divide between mainstream politics and radical groups. At one extreme there are the civil society organisations established by governments and international organisations. At the other we find civil society organisations that are considered criminal, such as terrorist groups and mafia organisations. These represent the two extremes of co-optation and ostracisation. In other words, they are examples of full integration into and full exclusion from the political system.

For groups closer to the mainstream of politics, or those groups seeking to enter the mainstream, there is always the risk of co-optation by the institutional system. Civil society organisations need financial resources, public recognition and political support – all of which can be provided or facilitated by the political system. At the same time, the political system may take advantage of the fragmentation and proliferation of civil society organisations by picking and choosing, on the basis of political convenience, the groups most inclined to cooperate with the current political agenda. In this way, there is a danger that some civil society organisations may find themselves used instrumentally to facilitate top-down representation of specific interests. On the other hand, issues of violence and resistance to political systems are always controversial, depending as they do on political interpretation. To borrow an old phrase, one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter. Those who take an oppositional stand to the status quo and agitate for material changes have often been criminalised and/or politically marginalised. We should always remember that the term ‘civil’ is normatively loaded and tends to be interpreted in line with the predominant ideology. For this reason, history is at times ironic: prominent political leaders such as South African president Nelson Mandela and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat were long considered to be leaders of criminal groups, perhaps even terrorists, and yet in due course they were both awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The case of the moratorium on the death penalty

The goal of abolishing the death penalty is a key aspiration of human rights activism. It is a contemporary example of how initiatives backed by civil society organisations can have lasting impact. While the topic of the death penalty has been debated for centuries, it is only in recent decades that significant institutional changes have occurred, with a number of countries removing capital punishment from their legal systems. The anti-death penalty stance only managed to gain importance at the United Nations level due to the specific transnational mobilisation of civil society organisations. While earlier activism contributed to creating the right political context at the national level, it was the campaign for a moratorium on the death penalty that specifically targeted the United Nations. This ultimately led to a significant UN General Assembly resolution in 2007 that was reconfirmed several times in subsequent years. In themselves, the resolutions and the changed attitude of a number of states are remarkable achievements in terms of human rights promotion, even if the death penalty still remains in some states.

The campaign developed through a multi-stage process of normative promotion. It began in a specific place – Italy. It then became stronger by ‘going transnational’ via civil society organisations networking together and sharing resources and ideas. The campaign then returned to the national domains so that key target states could be

Global Civil Society

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persuaded to back it. Finally, the campaign targeted the United Nations, where it successfully achieved the backing of the General Assembly. The dynamics of the process cannot be fully captured without making clear the part played by tactics of persuasion. Humanitarian diplomacy developed by civil society organisations through persuasion activities remains key. In this case the undertaking featured two main components. First, the idea of the right to life was communicated persuasively as a desirable outcome – something that attached well to several already popular international agendas. Second, an empathic process was generated by using powerful narratives drawn from individual cases. These were mainly stories told by people previously sentenced to death and now pardoned, or moving accounts by their relatives. In both cases, civil society organisations played a central role as either reason-based frame creators or emotion-based narrative disseminators. They played an important role as an alternative and/or adjunct to diplomatic politics and achieved a clear and lasting impact at the international level.

Conclusion

Over recent decades, civil society activities have been responsible for a number of important contributions. While this is still far from a decisive move towards a comprehensive democratisation of world politics, the incremental steps should not be underestimated. At least two kinds of impact can be identified. In the first instance, civil society organisations have managed to influence political decision-makers by giving voice to the voiceless and framing new issues. At the same time they have managed to pressurise global governance institutions so that today the overall level of transparency, consultation, outside evaluation and efficiency is measurably higher than it was in the past. Such results cannot be attributed solely to civil society, but they have been achieved in part by civil mobilisations.

Nevertheless, we need to acknowledge that in absolute terms the impact has been modest and uneven (see Scholte 2011). Most transnational activism has come from Western organisations, with significant exceptions in Latin America and Southeast Asia. Other parts of the world are still socially disconnected. Russia, China, most of Africa and the Arab world constitute islands which remain relatively isolated from the general growth of transnational civil society. And just as civil society organisations are unevenly concentrated in the Global North, the political results they have achieved also exhibit geopolitical imbalance. The gains realised by political activism have mostly been in line with agendas framed in northern states and benefitting northern constituencies. However, this is unlikely to continue as agendas arise from the developing world and international Western power and influence gradually declines. In such a climate, Western civil society organisations will have to share the stage with civil society organisations coming from the developing world. This will not always be easy, but it will hopefully make the future global civil society more genuinely 'global'.

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