Inhalt

Civil Society, Cooperation and Development
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While the title of this special issue suggests clarity, on closer scrutiny the terms involved deserve some careful (re-)interpretation. Often associated with a certain meaning and not further questioned, they actually invite efforts to establish what they really mean for those using them. 'Civil society', after all, remains a contentious, highly ambiguous, if not dubious term, just as 'development' does. Even more so, in fact, if we consider more recent discussions on a global civil society (Kaldor 2003; Kössler/Melber 1993, 2002; Löfgren/Thörn 2007). Like development, civil society has manifold different meanings and interpretations. Suffice to say that civil society agencies can be most uncivil, just like development can mean the opposite to its positive connotation (cf. Heine/Thakur 2011). Hence, the thematic focus of this guest-edited issue of JEP does not imply a straightforward answer to the implicit question of whether the role of 'civil society' in promoting 'development' is a good or bad form of cooperation (cf. Melber 2014). This cautionary caveat refers also to the complexity of the 'aidnography' and furthermore to the motivations and experiences of those engaged in various roles and locations within international development cooperation (cf. White 2015). Our introduction presents a few more general reflections on the subject, followed by a short summary presentation of the contributions.

1. Civil society cooperation in a globalised environment

The decline of the former colonial world half a century ago resulted in a much more diversified internationalism. Hitherto hardly existing forms of international relations emerged through new interactions entered by the

new sovereign states appearing on the global scene. Th se relations posed new realities facing Western hegemony and expansionism. The end of the bipolar world, which shaped most inter-state relations during the Cold War period, and the subsequent new multipolar tendencies with new powerful actors from the so-called global South emerging, created another dynamic. The slogan of the World Social Forum (WSF) as one indicator of new alignments in formation states that "Another World is Possible". It testifies to new social struggles taking shape at the turn of the century. But the other world taking shape in parallel was to a large extent influenced by different agencies, not least symbolised by the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the new global state players. While local as well as global forms of civil society changed, fundamental changes also took place in other influential spheres of power. State(s) and civil society required new efforts to come to terms with the emerging realities, shaped increasingly by a neoliberal paradigm and its world-wide effects. Th se realities blurred an imaginary line between the state and non-state actors and the different meanings and roles involved. Such a previously cultivated, almost automatically applied assumption of divided responsibilities between state and society tended to equate what became associated with the term 'civil society' as something positive, by definition. In the meantime, however, a necessarily more nuanced debate has gradually occupied space in the public and academic discourses, with some less simplified approaches. To get beyond the rather polarised debates over the meaning of civil society, it was suggested "to conceptualise global civil society in *analytical* terms as a political space, in which a diversity of political experiences, action strategies, identities, values and norms are articulated and contested; a space of struggle and conflict over the values, norms and rules that govern global social space(s) – and ultimately over the control of material resources and institutions. Whether global civil society means increasing democratisation or colonisation then becomes empirical questions, to which the answers largely depend on the context" (Thörn/Moksnes 2012: 5; original emphasis).

This is an approach which provides access to assessing and dealing with development in its ambiguity on a case-to-case basis. While already a theme among political philosophers of the 19th century, the notion of civil society gained new value through the theoretical reflections of Antonio Gramsci. Largely disappearing from the social sciences debates for almost

half a century, it has, since the popular protest movements in Eastern Europe during the 1980s, gained new currency as a category. Soon afterwards, the battle over its meaning signalled another victory for those who associated civil society with bourgeois democracy and saw it as an integral part of a specific notion of 'good governance', which became the watchword and reference point for the 1990s (cf. Abrahamsen 2000). Since then, civil society has been taken for granted as a relevant category and political factor by means of civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations – as reflected by the common use of their acronyms CSO and NGO – acting both in local and global policy making and norm setting (Cheema/Popovski 2010).

The concept of civil society was appropriated with enthusiasm by the aid system latest since the mid-1980s, especially because of the ambiguity of the concept. The at best ambiguous notion 'civil society' fitted well both the neoliberal agendas of mainstream development agencies with an emphasis on good governance, and those of alternative development stressing the collective action and transformative potential of civil society (Howell/Pearce 2002). Subscribing both to the neo-Tocquevillean idea of associations as mediators between states and citizens, and the neo-Gramscian understanding of civil society as a space for counterhegemonic action, the diverse actors energetically started to allocate funding and to support civil society with a diverse vision of the 'development' that civil society could bring. Within the aid system, civil society soon mainly translated into NGOs (Edwards 2004), which gradually developed into an international organisational field with particular isomorphic organisational practices and circulating 'buzzwords' (Tvedt 1998; 2006; Watkins et al. 2012). The academic attention to the dynamics of this field grew exponentially in the 1990s, ranging from theories of development management (Lewis 2007) to close examination of the dynamics of the system (Hilhorst 2003).

But to what extent is civil society or parts of it involved in social transitions to which the term development is usually applied? As so often, there is a thin line between becoming critically engaged with a system in order to change it and ending up being coopted by the system in order to stabilise it – which, strictly speaking, might still allow for reformist changes on a limited scale according to the proclaimed aims, such as, for example, poverty reduction or peace building or fighting hunger and diseases (or even

reducing carbon emissions, for that matter). However, one should not close one's eyes before the reality that "[I]n practice most of today's development-oriented NGOs are contracted by international organisations and governments to supplement government efforts at providing services to the poor, to foster the neoliberal paradigm and to take the place of collective social movements and their confrontational politics which seek to change power structures rather (sic) seeking accommodations within it" (Singh 2010: 86).

This raises anew the fundamental as well as strategic question of with whom to engage and for what purpose. Actors within the civil society agencies and social movements hold very different views and testify to the fact, stressed at the beginning, that civil society is anything but homogenous and embraces very different if not antagonistic interests and forces. Most importantly, even if civil society proponents at times create the impression that they are the ones who can fix social challenges and shortcomings best, this is a naïve illusion we should not fall for. While civil society is an important ingredient of governance, and certainly of 'good governance', it is at best an influential catalyst and facilitator, but not the panacea for fixing social evils on its own: "CSOs are not a magic path to development, nor are they a substitute for responsive, effective states capable of delivering tangible and sustained improvements in people's lives. In practice development requires both" (Green 2008; as quoted in Singh 2010: 88).

The "Mindset Appeal", which was drafted as the point of departure by the Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives (2012: 4) ahead of its work to compile a CSO-input for the Rio+20 conference, rightly demanded (in vain) from the Rio 2012 Summit to "re-affirm the State as the indispensable actor setting the legal frame, enforcing standards of equity and human rights, and fostering long-term ecological thinking, based on democratic legitimacy." States remain relevant if not decisive entities and battlefields over the future of societies and the wellbeing of the people composing these societies. Given the efforts for "bringing the state back in", one tends to agree with the warning that "it would be highly premature for development studies to replace the paradigmatic importance of the state by that of civil society" (Schuurman 2001: 13).

It is of interest that the global shifts and the evolving role of global civil society actors such as the International Advocacy NGOs (IANGOs) have also impacted on the reflections of the World Economic Forum

(WEF), which in mid-2012 established an initiative to explore the rapidly evolving space in which civil society actors operate. As stated in the Executive Summary of the report, released for Davos 2013, "[…] civil society should be the glue that binds public and private activity together in such a way as to strengthen the common good. In playing this role, civil society actors need to ensure they retain their core missions, integrity, purposefulness and high levels of trust. […] Civil society can play a particularly powerful role in this process as an enabler and constructive challenger, creating the political and social space for collaborations that are based on the core values of trust, service and the collective good" (World Economic Forum 2013: 6).

This all sounds very enlightened from the point of view of those who still continue to hold and execute the power of definition over official versions of narratives in policy and governance matters. After all, who should trust whom and why? Civil society agencies engaged in development cooperation and other forms of international exchanges are often dependent upon substantial public funding from within the states in which they are based. Changing priorities in the financial allocations to NGOs, as well as new paradigms in development cooperation, have gradually shifted the emphasis of the criteria imposed on such NGOs to obtain and further secure the material support for their activities from states. This tendency has also gradually further undermined the autonomy of NGOs, whose operation requires budget allocations from ministries. At the same time, it enhances the pressure on them to reinvent themselves in the light of the contextual changes, as a recent case study of one of the biggest Dutch NGOs has suggested (Elbers/Schulpen 2015). Similar tendencies can be also observed with regard to the International NGOs (INGOs), which by necessity have to engage with the aid industry or are actually part of it (cf. Kane 2013).

2. Exploring the different perspectives on civil society cooperation

Against this background, the contributions to this special issue provide a variety of approaches to the civil society-development nexus. Th y are revised versions of papers originally presented in two working groups on civil society and NGOs at the 2nd Nordic Conference for Development

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Research on Knowing Development – Developing Knowledge held in Espoo, Finland, during November 2013 (see also Jauhola/Kontinen 2014).

The first part of the issue problematises the applicability of the very concept of civil society in a variety of contexts. *Simone Datzberger* recapitulates some of the social theory foundations of the term and its meaning(s). By doing so, she shows how closely the concept is embedded in Western political theory. Nevertheless, it nonetheless lacks coherence and has different meanings. She therefore questions its uncritical or un-reflected use, especially when addressing the contemporary post-conflict states. *Axel Borchgrevink*, somewhat contrasting this understanding, contends that the concept has an analytical function. He illustrates the meaning(s) by summarising different manifestations and forms of civil society in Nicaragua from a historical perspective.

In the context of international development cooperation, the concept of civil society has often been used in a quite restricted way in reference to NGOs, which range from large IANGOs operating worldwide as global players to small local organisations. However, the NGO field has become increasingly professionalised, and good will and best intentions alone are no longer good enough. NGOs need to operate in a more focused and clearly defined way in their management as a matter of survival, and are often forced to scale down in order to maintain a sustainable basis. *Rachel Hayman* discusses how NGOs deal with the withdrawal from their partner countries and how the knowledge of the strategies needed is shared. *Tiina Kontinen and Hisayo Katsui* present two case studies from Finland to illustrate the dilemmas in their efforts to seek best knowledge practices with regard to transparency, accountability and participation of local stakeholders. The NGOs have also conceptualised new evaluation methods in response to the pressure to create knowledge, but remain confronted with a balancing act.

Civil society development is by nature and definition a continuously changing field. For example, there is an increasing attempt to re-interpret the relationship between various diasporas and their home countries in the framework of development. *Päivi Pirkkalainen* discusses the relationship of the Somali diaspora and local development initiatives as a particular case, which shows how a diaspora moves between its roots of origin and the new home environment.

In a personal account based on field research confrontations, *Sirpa Rovaniemi* shares experiences concerning the challenges that an ethnographer meets in the twilight zone between encounters with civil society agencies, the aid industry, and the research community in the case of colliding interests within a local community organisation in India.

The different cases and levels of reflection complement each other in a search for common ground with regard to the overarching question of if and to what extent civil society initiatives are able to offer support for a form of development which merits the name. The conclusion is – as one could expect – rather inconclusive: civil society actors are neither per se better nor worse than official ODA activities of state agencies. It largely depends on a case-to-case assessment. This is where this introduction comes to a full circle and ends where it had started. While the informality of some initiatives might be a strength, they could be also a weakness, in as much as the professionalism of other actors might reproduce similar ambiguities. Civil society is no panacea for development, nor a guarantee of promoting the kind of development that would merit support. Yet, as non-state actors, these forms of internationalism play a role and are important. Th y hence deserve and require a closer examination in order to further explore the scope as well as the limitations of such interaction. We trust that the contributions add useful insights to a needed (self-)critical investigation. We thank the editorial group of JEP for providing us with this forum, the reviewers of the submissions for their many valuable comments, and we are also grateful to Bettina Köhler for her guidance and communication during the process of editing the articles presented.

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