THE FUTURE OF PARTICIPATORY CIVIL SOCIETY ASSESSMENTS: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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FOREWORD

A key obstacle faced by governments and development partners in engaging with civil society is the lack of thorough and independent assessments of the extent, structure and capacity of national civil society actors. In recent years, there have been more scientific efforts to understand and advance the knowledge base on civil society in its various formations. One effort in promoting participatory civil society assessments has taken shape through the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI).

With seed funding from UNDP in 1999, CIVICUS designed the Civil Society Index as a tool that is implemented by and for civil society organizations at the country level. The CSI results in detailed reports on the status of national civil society, highlighting the structure of civil society – its main actors and relationships, values and impact, and the external environment. UNDP with the engagement of United Nations Country Teams has since 2004 supported the implementation of the CSI in 27 countries. For UNDP and the UN system as a whole, these assessments have contributed to a better understanding of and meaningful interactions with civil society organizations, and in a number of instances helped to strengthen civic engagement for democratic governance.

UNDP believes that it is important to integrally link assessments of civil society to the organization's expanding work on governance assessments to generate political investment to create and protect civic space among governments and other stakeholders. The future of civil society assessments needs to build on the fact that genuine civil society infrastructure emerges indigenously. External drivers can influence and shape this process, but initiatives are unlikely to last without successful adaptation to local context and realities, and an ability to effectively foster action for development results.

The landscape of civil society assessments has evolved greatly in recent years, with the emergence of a number of new methodologies. Periodic reviews of these experiences in assessing civil society are necessary to take stock of what has worked and identify lessons for future exercises. To this end, UNDP has produced a set of three inter-related publications. The first is _A Users' Guide to Civil Society Assessments_ (2010). It is the first full review of the current landscape of civil society assessments at global and local levels, providing wide-ranging stakeholders with practical knowledge of as well as systematic guidance in developing new methods. The guide describes the scope of available methods and the ways in which future assessments can further enrich our ability to understand the nature and impact of civil society.

The second, _Participatory Civil Society Assessments – Experiences from the Field_ (2011), looks into UNDP experiences in five countries – Cyprus, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Mozambique, Uruguay and Viet Nam – in implementing the CIVICUS Civil Society Index.

The third report is this paper on the future of participatory assessments of civil society, which presents four perspectives by leading academics and practitioners in this field. We are grateful to our contributors, Helmut Anheier, Alan Fowler, Richard Holloway and Amani Kandil, for their guidance, support and continued commitment to this work.

We also express our sincere appreciation to our partners around the world from whom we have learned a great deal on a subject of vital importance to all of us. We hope this paper serves as a helpful basis for discussion among our colleagues, partners in civil society, governments and multilateral institutions seeking entry points for a better and informed engagement with civil society.
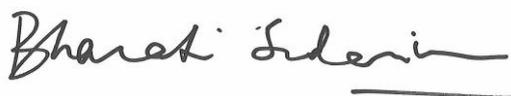
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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Helmut K. Anheier is Professor of Sociology at Heidelberg University and serves as Academic Director of the Center for Social Investment. He is also Dean of the Hertie School of Governance, Berlin. From 2001 to 2009, he was Professor of Public Policy and Social Welfare at University of California Los Angeles School of Public Affairs, where he founded and directed the Center for Civil Society. From 1998 to 2002 he was the founding director of the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics, and a member of LSE's Department of Social Policy, where he now holds the honorary title of Centennial Professor. Prior to this he was a Senior Research Associate and Project Co-Director at the Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies, and Associate Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University.

Alan Fowler

Alan Fowler has over 30 years experience of civil society organizations worldwide. He has worked as manager, analyst, adviser, writer and donor and has made specific contributions to NGO development through his books, publications and conference presentations. In 1992, he co-founded the International NGO Training Research Centre in Oxford, England, as a resource to enhance NGO capabilities. Until recently he was President of the International Society for Third Sector Research and a board member of CIVICUS. He has published extensively on civil society issues, non-governmental organizations and the international aid system. His latest contributions are co-edited volumes on capacity development (2010) and a compendium on NGO management (2010), both published by Earthscan.

Richard Holloway

Richard Holloway is currently the Coordinator for PRAN (Program for Accountability in Nepal) for the World Bank in Kathmandu. He was until this year the Civil Society Programme Director at Aga Khan Development Network in Geneva. He is widely experienced in the field of civil society, civil society organizations, and their role in development. He has worked in Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean on long term contracts in this field as project director, aid administrator and trainer for the last 40 years. He has also written a number of books and manuals specialising in sustainability and local resource mobilization.

Amani Kandil

Amani Kandil is the Executive Director of the Arab Network for NGOs in Cairo, Egypt. She has been a consultant to the Follow-up Committee for Arab NGOs in Cairo, and served as an expert on public policies and public opinion at the National Center for Social Criminological Research. She has also worked as a lecturer at Cairo University, and as a local associate in the Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Kandil was formerly a political writer and an announcer and producer for Egyptian Radio. She is a board member of CIVICUS, and the National Council for Women. Dr. Kandil earned her doctorate in political science from Cairo University in Egypt.

This analysis aims to contribute to the discussion between different stakeholders on future approaches in participatory civil society assessments. It does not provide an overview of the literature on the subject.

The contributing authors were selected on the basis of their backgrounds and prominence in providing leadership in creating, implementing or overseeing different civil society assessments over time. The key questions they were asked to address include the following:

- What are the key strengths and weaknesses of the current tools used to assess civil society?
- What should an ideal participatory civil society assessment look like in the future, e.g., in 2015?
- How can participatory civil society assessments help in improving governance at a local level as well as transversally (e.g. through a comparative and cross-national assessment)?
- Can these assessments be used more strategically by various stakeholders?
- How can this happen in the future? Please provide key recommendations, keeping the UN and other development partners in mind.

Each author came with distinct strengths, regional and sectoral insights to the debate.

Helmut Anheier brought a primarily technical lens to this review and recommendations. His paper tracks the main civil society assessment methods and analyses whether they indeed capture and generate the data they have set out to do.

Richard Holloway focuses on the implementation process of assessments, as this has often proven to be at least equally important to the data it has gathered. Both authors examine whether or not the processes adopted achieved the active participation of stakeholders and promoted ownership as planned.

Amani Kandil and Alan Fowler approach the analysis from a political angle. Civil society is through these assessments to be recognized principally as a political agent of change, specific to each cultural context. International and comparative civil society assessments, when implemented in non-western countries, face an added challenge. The concepts and theories are often regarded as imposed or out of context, and thus not able to accurately reflect what is necessary and important for civil society in a specific country. The key questions these two authors look at include the following:

- Have current civil society assessments been useful and policy-relevant in non-western countries? What are the specific aspects that have been useful or prevented the assessment from being useful?
- Does the internal and context-specific nature of civil society allow for an internationally comparable civil society assessment? If international comparability were nonetheless desirable, how could this be achieved, while still giving due prominence to local factors and needs?

A final technical note on the papers is that they were commissioned simultaneously. While authors were able and encouraged to communicate with one another, the papers did not influence each other during the time of drafting. While on the one hand this presented a risk in diversity of themes and approaches it also was an opportunity to assess possible overlaps in debate topics that go beyond the guidelines provided by UNDP.

The resulting papers provided a personal account based on decades of engagement and experience of each of the authors. While heterogeneous in style and approach they cover some key themes in common. While the perspectives of Fowler, Holloway and Kandil lend themselves to being compared regarding the main issues raised, Anheier recommends an overall technical shift in how assessments are envisioned and implemented.

All four authors focus on specific civil society assessments[1] and much of the analysis applies to the current 'generation' of assessments in general. The main critique focuses on specific aspects of the design and implementation of civil society assessments, the need for and use of civil society assessments is described by Fowler:

"The creation of civil society assessments […] offers a fuller understanding of how any society anticipates, prevents and resolves wicked problems, such as unemployment, low life-expectancy, corruption, xenophobia, poverty, inequality, poor governance, injustices and insecurity." (Fowler 2011)

Fowler argues that civil society assessments have yet to reach this potential. Assessments need to be **tailored and specific to their own national and historical contexts**. As Holloway notes, "The majority of the discourse about civil society, and civil society assessments, is under the umbrella of the international aid industry". The implications of this are that "the approach of the civil society building industry […] resembles a crude attempt to manipulate associational life in line with Western, and specifically North American, liberal democratic templates."[2] In this regard, comparative assessments are generally shaped by the agendas of donors or other international actors and "driven by the nature of the funds and the funder".

In line with the thinking that civil society assessments have to come out of a **local need** (as opposed to a top-down policy driven need) is the perceived **declining relevance of international comparability**. This includes the impact that comparative assessments aim at having on governance approaches at the national level. While it has been successful to varying degrees (depending on the political will and agendas of different actors), follow-up on recommendations at the national level has been fairly weak. National particularities and nuances are lost when over-generalized into an aggregate measure.

The conclusion is that the domains and structure of assessments need to be **endogenously defined**. Fowler's view is that "the bedrock of civil society anywhere emerges from people's 'organic' collaborative efforts in the sense of being self-organized, self-driven, resilient and resourced both locally and through networks that increasingly span the world."

However, a main difference between Kandil's view of civil society assessments, compared to Fowler and Holloway, is that she focuses on the assessment of CSOs in particular.

Both Fowler and Holloway present concerns with an **organization-centred bias of civil society assessments**. Holloway says that "the large number of civil society organizations outside such boundaries[3] are much more important for the health of society than the formal ones". Fowler emphasizes that "robust assessments must include foundational, rural, informal and fluid forms of civic agency such as social movements and networks, and the processes connecting them." While some assessments have acknowledged the need to include informal expressions of civil society (such as the CIVICUS CSI), it remains to be fully addressed in practice. As Holloway notes, "[n]either donors, nor governments, nor NGO coordinating bodies, not indeed other CSOs will normally expand their horizon to include in it those CSOs which are not obviously developmental nor foreign-funded because operationally they consider that it is such CSOs which are important for the sector." In this regard, "civil society assessments, because they are assessing a limited sub-set of CSOs, are missing out a large number of other CSOs which may have greater impact on the quality of life because they are rooted in their own societies and not dependent on foreign funds". Fowler makes use of an example drawn from the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project as implemented in South Africa (e.g., involving methodology which uses a survey that assessed people's associational life), noting that some 54 per cent of associations that played an important part in people's lives were not formally registered.

Fowler raises the important issue of 'NGO-ization' of civil society assessments and its implications:

> "[I]n many countries the term NGO remains the collective label for the civil arena's very complicated membership and activities. This situation is problematic because legislation framed from this way of thinking imposes an exogenous frame on endogenous phenomena. In addition, it pushes assessment toward (counting) actors at the cost of processes. And, moreover, it assumes the universality of a western normative logic and categories that have to make sense for all parties involved in an assessment exercise."

Moreover, from an analytical standpoint, the **'three sector' view** (state, market, civil society) and assumptions of donors ignore un-civic expressions of both civil society and the complexity of civil society and society at large that can cause and solve political problems.

A critical challenge faced by civil society in many countries around the world concerns the issue of **political space for the implementation of civil society assessments**. One of the country case studies highlighted in the companion piece also reminds the reader that open assessments within restrictive political environments may overly expose a sector that is generally seen as 'antagonistic' (see Viet Nam case study). Kandil, also noting that authoritarian regimes perceive civil society as the 'opponent', says civil society may be sensitive about information that is made public, as this may be used against its interests. The complex interaction of the historic reality and background of such regimes with society in general plays a key role in shaping civil society and how it operates. Kandil notes that, in the absence of a "healthy cultural environment", the prerequisites for implementing civil society assessments are difficult to meet. These are "respect for the values of transparency and accountability, free flow of information and sharing of knowledge, and respect of the value and practice of inclusion."

All authors seem to agree that the foundation laid by the current generation of civil society assessments is not to be disregarded, as many lessons can be learned and future assessments built on the current successes and shortcomings as documented over time.

Anheier raises a cautionary note on the relative success or failure of civil society assessments, noting that weaknesses in the eyes of some users may well be key strengths for others. In other words, the academic community, practitioners, policy makers all have different agendas and will therefore prioritize different things when assessing civil society.

Anheier presents an interesting suggestion: **a shift towards forecasting of civil society** that in his view can be useful in making civil society assessments play a more important and relevant role in governance processes. His suggestion is to adopt a dual approach of implementing a data platform to mine existing information that will allow policymakers and civil society activists to make use of this for forecasting and foresight approaches (Anheier 2011:3). This way the tensions arising out of the conflicting needs of the three different epistemological communities, typically reflected in existing civil society assessments, could be addressed. These approaches are most useful "the more they involve and invite diverse groups as well as different opinions and perspectives" (Anheier, 2011:4). This would therefore have a 'built-in' feature of expanding beyond 'the usual suspects', of NGOs that are active in development in a given country.

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[1] Fowler, Anheier and Holloway focused mostly on the CIVICUS CSI based on UNDP's longstanding commitment to the project; other assessments included in the analyses are the USAID NGO Sustainability Index (Holloway), ARVIN (Anheier) and the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Project (Holloway, Anheier and Fowler). Kandil's paper provided a general reflection, referring only briefly to the CSI specifically.

[2] Edwards, Michael (2009). *Civil Society* (2nd edition). Cambridge: Polity Press.

[3] The term 'boundaries' refers to what is termed civil society and what is not.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **A new generation of country-led civil society assessments**
   Building on the progress made in civil society assessments since 2000, there is a common understanding that the time is right for a next generation of assessment tools. These new tools will address important fundamental issues of philosophy, principle and methods. Additionally, the new tools will invariably have to take into account research findings that challenge existing ideas about effective civic engagement. The new generation of assessments needs to be tailored to national and historical contexts. They will also need to be more rigorous, with greater contextual rootedness in concepts, categories and measurement.

2. **New approaches to civil society assessment**
   Civil society assessment tools and reports must be relevant and anticipate emerging issues. Current tools need to shift from mapping and reporting to forecasting and foresight to be more relevant to civil society and policymakers. Forecasting stands as the technical and quantitative aspect while foresight focuses on qualitative and interpretative approach. Both aspects allow actors to specify agendas, explore alternative approaches and stimulate debate amongst stakeholders.

3. **Diminishing returns of international comparative civil society assessments**
   The time has come to expand and disaggregate assessment tools to make them progressively more meaningful and valid locally. Future assessment tools have to be led by local stakeholders. However being locally focused and concentrating on specific domains does not mean that the comparative perspective and lessons need to be disregarded. Rather, it means that the policy implications are targeted at locally relevant actors.

4. **Versatile range of tools to satisfy different stakeholders**
   The assumption that a single assessment tool can address the need of academics, practitioners and policymakers is erroneous. Various stakeholders have different needs and expectations. Each tool should take into account its respective 'professional deformation', and take it as strength while building bridges to compensate weaknesses.

5. **Acknowledging 'Western' bias**
   Civil society is a result of the interactions between a political and economic regime, a given socio-cultural history and the society as a whole in a given moment. It is important to question the applicability of 'Western' theories and approaches to non-western societies.

6. **Constraints in conducting assessments in restrictive and culturally sensitive environments**
   Values such as collective work, mutual trust and self-criticism are aspects of a 'healthy' environment which participatory assessments rely on. When these elements are weak or absent, it becomes difficult to achieve positive results.

7. **Emphasize a multi-stakeholder approach**
   It is essential that representatives of government, business and the organized citizenry come together and think through how to promote good society and democracy. All stakeholders need to be involved not just to enumerate or survey CSOs, but to re-think what the role of CSOs might be.

8. **Going beyond NGOs**

   'Civil society' is commonly used in international discourse but in developing countries the term commonly used to cover the civic arena's complex make-up remains 'NGO'. Legislation framed from this line of thought imposes an exogenous structure on endogenous phenomena. Civil society is commonly assumed to be a reference to public formal organizations which use aid funds and have legal structures. In reality civil society comprises more than formal civil society organizations. The large numbers of informal organizations have greater importance for the health of society than formal ones.

9. **Going beyond a sectoral approach**

   Assessment tools must take into account the connections and power relations across institutions rather than isolate civil society as a single sector. To be in touch with reality, assessments have to cope with the blurring of institutional boundaries. A 'domain' approach represents one of many solutions.

10. **Using a domain approach to civil society assessments**

    Development as a multi-actor, multi-level process can help prevent participants to be involved in an information-extractive exercise. A domain approach encompasses all types of institutions and organizations that make sense in terms of the issue at hand. It avoids the problematic sectoral approach in its starting point and framework methods. A domain approach calls for a less actor-centric and more systemic view in determining categories and measures.

11. **Adopt a clearer multi-centred theory of governance**

    New approaches to assessment need to pay direct attention to the multiple sites of governance. A bottom-up approach rather than a top-down approach will help engage assessment towards the deep politics that robust, as opposed to symbolic, democracy requires. The authority to translate policy into practice is seldom centralised. Citizens therefore face many institutional types and locations where governance plays out and can be influenced.

12. **Recognizing norm-free assessment as a fallacy**

    Any robust assessment of civil society cannot rely on a norm-free and 'harmony' model of change whose norms count is power-related. External agencies will be forced to make a choice about which value sets they wish to work for and against. Neutrality is not an option. The aid agenda has a normative position that needs to be politically managed. Recognizing value pre-dispositions helps prevent assessments that have prejudicial blind spots.

13. **Maintaining the image of a 'good' civil society**

    There is a tendency to treat civil society as an intrinsically 'good' thing for society and for development. Such a view downplays factors such as extremisms, inter-group intolerance, xenophobia, and the capture of politics by narrow interests that also drive change.

14. **Bridging gaps in follow-ups**

    A distinct approach to civil society assessments is participatory action-research assessment. In this format, participation will not just create new knowledge but also renew energy and increase capacity to (collectively) act. Their capability to act on CSO-generated knowledge processes is often co-determined by commitment, donor configurations and the domestic politics in play. These common conditions often make these tools a one-off event rather than the catalyst for an action process. However, experience from a good number of countries suggests that such a process can lend itself to capacity development if undertaken in a purposeful, facilitated way.

I

FROM SECTORS TO PROCESSES: UNDERSTANDING CIVIL SOCIETY IN ACTION
Alan Fowler

Introduction

This paper offers ideas for the future directions for assessment of civil society. At a national level, this terrain of work shows a crude division. Some assessments are tied to the agendas, policies and financing of international development aid. Other assessments do not rely on this framework or its needs. Latter assessments are illustrated by nations and states, such as Wales or Bahrain or Italy, that wish to explore their own civic reality in new ways. While these are included in the scope of this paper, the perspective adopted is mainly tied to assessment within the United Nations system and its development partners.

The content draws on some thirty years of the author's involvement in this area of thinking, research and practice. This period includes six years (2000-2006) as chairperson of the CIVICUS programme committee responsible for advising on and overseeing the CSI and, subsequently, as a member of the CSI international advisory group.

For UNDP, reviewing experience in civil society assessments is necessary to identify lessons which can inform future involvement with this type of initiative, which has been located within wider policy considerations (e.g., UNDP, 2009b on Democratic Governance). UNDP's association with civil society assessment is, inter alia, heavily associated with the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI). Since supporting CSI's inception in 1999, UNDP has invested some $2 million in this participatory method of self-assessments undertaken in 30-odd countries (UNDP, 2009a).[1] Of necessity the CSI therefore features to a large extent in this analysis.

Assessments, such as the CSI, have not been designed for or limited to an aid framework. Experience throughout the world shows the importance of citizens bringing change to society both at home and abroad (Green, 2008; Fowler and Biekart, 2008; Fowler, 2009). Civil society assessments therefore offer a fuller understanding of how any society anticipates, prevents and resolves wicked problems [2], such as unemployment, low life-expectancy, corruption, xenophobia, poverty, inequality, poor governance, injustices and insecurity. Looking to their future is therefore necessarily wider than aided international development efforts, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

> *Experience throughout the world shows the importance of citizens bringing change to society at home and abroad.*

One value of the CSI, and other international comparative measures, is to energise governments to hold or improve their rankings in social, political, ecological and other dimensions of well-being.[3]

Creating this type of comparative pressure and basis for knowledge exchange across countries has been an important function of the CSI in a politically sensitive area of relations between state- and citizen-owned efforts to shape their future. However, this paper will argue that further refinement of assessment for this purpose faces diminishing returns. Surmounting the many methodological and cost challenges required for refinement will not do much to make comparisons more effective. Applying CSI-type assessments in a country periodically – say every three years – to track and reflect on changes is likely to generate more added value.

different future is called for, which addresses some fundamental issues of philosophy, principle and methods that have dogged large scale, blanket civil society and non-profit assessments.[4] By and large, past and present assessments have not adequately resolved a critical challenge. This is to conceptually and methodologically accommodate the essential feature of associational life. The bedrock of civil society anywhere emerges from people's 'organic' collaborative efforts in the sense of being self-organized, self-driven, resilient and resourced both locally and through networks that increasingly span the world. How, why and when they combine and unfold into layers and self-create high-level structures over time is specific to each society. Assessments have yet to take full account of the foundational elements of civil society.

> *In most countries of the world, foreign assistance has had no role to play in the evolution of civil society.*

In most countries of the world, foreign assistance has had no role to play in the evolution of civil society. Where aid has been in the picture, it is of negligible or limited importance in establishing the deep fabric of socio-political relations that drives the development path, winners and losers, and speed of a whole society. This sense of realism and proportionality is often missing from aid policies which over-state their importance.

Other essays in this report cover the technical substance of assessing civil society. While alluding to these features when required, this paper focuses attention on the more political dimensions, process assumptions and diverse motivations that have driven assessments over time and at different scales. As a sort of backdrop and base line, the next section provides a brief retro-perspective of civil society assessment.[5] This preparation establishes the basis for a critical review of what can be learned from this experience in terms of 'what next?' Answering this question is the subject of Section Three, framed in terms of what, in principle, an 'ideal'

participatory assessment would look like for UNDP in the years to come.

A major conclusion is that past and present large scale assessments serve a valuable purpose in illuminating the poorly understood socio-political processes taking place within every society. However, progress in civil society assessment requires innovation that complements existing national efforts. Experience indicates the value of working with a different framework to guide future assessments. This shift would: (i) remedy existing shortcomings; (ii) bring coherence across the diversity of what has been undertaken so far; and (iii) incorporate the results of research and other new sources of knowledge about civil society in development both aided and otherwise.

In terms of the first requirement, future civil society assessments will need to: (a) adopt a clearer multi-centred theory of governance that better corresponds to the lived reality of citizens; (b) provide a consistent logic between different scales of enquiry; (c) be able to focus on selected domains of socio-political change that civil society is involved with; (d) recognize the anti-social elements within civil society as protagonists in processes of change; (e) reduce urban and NGO biases in perspectives and methods; (f) pay more attention to the socio-cultural determinants and endogenous understandings of civil society; and (g) reduce demands for our expectations about international comparability in favour of greater attention to context-driven actions emanating from assessment processes.

These inter-related revisions will need to be combined within a future (post-2015) context where the majority of poor people will be found in middle-income countries (Sumner, 2010). That is, where aid volumes are of (very) marginal importance for poverty reduction and where inequality may be a more critical development issue.

Retro-perspective

The implosion of the former Soviet Union renewed interest in civil society as a force in socio-political change. One outcome was the instigation of dedicated studies at different scales. Their objectives ranged from 'knowledge for its own value' to more utilitarian motivations. Value-neutral 'scientific' studies were undertaken alongside assessments which apply a normative position. Some, like the CSI, were tied to an expressed intention for stakeholders to act on the findings.[6] Both types of study were similar in their need to 'map and measure' civil society as an observable phenomenon under varied conditions across the world.

In the context of international aid, no review of assessing civil society can escape the story of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Based on western models, NGOs have been propagated in aided countries. There has also been an evolution of a distinct discourse of 'NGO-ism'. This process has established a western-centred framework in which civil society has been understood by both citizens and states.[7] In other words, the notion of the civil society to be assessed has often been pre-conditioned and part-formed by the aid system itself. This history has – for example, in post-Soviet and post-Yugoslavian countries – introduced mind sets, imposed norms, influenced laws and established institutional biases that new designs of assessment need to take into account. With this in mind, a brief chronology may help clarify what a civil society assessment has looked like to date.

NGO evolution and its influence on assessments of civil society

With origins in the 1930s, NGOs firmly entered the mainstream development scene in the late 1970s. At this time, principal arguments for their value were: (1) comparative advantages over government for micro-development in the South, allied to (2) their value as voices in favour of aid and development in donor countries, the North.

This economic and aid-serving interpretation fed pro-NGO policies of the official aid system. Some 20-plus years of such support has led to sizeable growth in NGO funding from public resources. The process continues to feed expansion of NGOs in the South, with increasing dependency on official aid.

> *The notion of the civil society to be assessed has often been pre-conditioned and part-formed by the aid system itself.*

In the early 1980s, interest in assessing NGOs was, by and large, focused on the capacity of individual organizations to run development projects. The approach, while often participatory in a self-assessment way, relied on tools with various levels of sophistication. Typical was a diagnostic checklist of necessary features following western non-profit prescripts. These instruments became increasingly laden with 'professionalising' recommendations and jargon associated with the business community. Sector-level and national assessments were seldom considered or designed. When they were, they typically focused on creating an NGO directory, amending legislation or establishing codes of conduct.

A game changer in this trajectory was the fall of the former Soviet Union noted above. This unprecedented event initiated the 'relocation' of NGOs into civil society as a political category and 'arena' in the fabric of a nation state. Contending ways in which civil society was conceptualised became dominated by neo-liberal political theory that official donors followed domestically. This frame was tied to a 'sector' view of a society's functional structure. Here, non-profit principles and implicit pro-social aims are defining features of the 'third' sector.

The emancipatory potential of civic agency shown in the former Soviet Union's demise spurred donor interest in the democratizing potential of existing and newly founded NGOs, especially in post-Soviet countries. As time went by, there came an ever widening view of civil society inhabitants beyond NGOs. However, inclusion was typically

seen through the functional lens of aid agendas, such as the MDGs and good governance and ignored 'uncivil' society.

In international discourse, civil society became the concept of choice. However, in many developing countries the term NGO remains the collective label for the civic arena's very complicated membership and activities. This situation is problematic because legislation framed from this way of thinking imposes an exogenous frame on endogenous phenomena.[8] In addition, it pushes assessment towards (counting) actors at the cost of processes. And, moreover, it assumes the universality of a western normative logic and categories that have to make sense for all parties involved in an assessment exercise.[9] Finally, it has the tendency to treat civil society as an intrinsically 'good' thing for society and for development. In doing so, the shadow side, for example, extremisms, inter-group intolerance, xenophobia, and the capture of politics by narrow interests that also drive change is downplayed. Generally speaking, anti-social, conflictual factions, motivations and outcomes which destabilise the polity and feed insecurity are under-represented or ignored.

With these comments in mind, the post-Soviet era prompted many initiatives to try to describe and enumerate civil society country-by-country (or nation) across the world. These exercises exhibit a wide range in terms of intentions and analytic framing. When these experiences are applied against the above historical sketch, what can we learn?

Assessing assessments

In this limited paper, assessments can probably best be judged in terms of: (1) motivations, assumptions and parameters; (2) methods employed; and (3) results against intentions.

Motivations, assumptions and parameters

Inevitably, (comparative) assessment of civil society as a whole has been driven by the nature of the funds and the funder. By and large, foundation-based finance was interested in creating new knowledge for its own value. Aid-related financing has been more purposeful in terms of usefulness in (donor) policy and practice. Here, three types of intended application can be seen. It has been anticipated that national scale civil society assessments will generate information that aid agencies and national governments can use to:

- Improve the efficiency of a society – by (re-) distributing tasks and resources to the most capable sectors;
- Improve the institutional arrangements of a society – by reforming rules, laws and conventions that co-determine the environment for civic agency as a key capability to solve social problems and cope with future uncertainties;
- Improve the democratic quality of a society – by enhancing inclusion in political systems, allied to greater transparency and accountability of public administration.

Sector-level and national assessments were seldom considered or designed. When they were, they typically focused on creating an NGO directory, amending legislation or establishing codes of conduct.

These objectives are not mutually exclusive. If properly applied, they can reinforce one another. However, each relies on a 'theory' with assumptions about the 'transmission mechanisms' between civil society and its effects on socio-political change.

Common assumptions are that civil society needs: (1) adequate capability for assertion and influence on power relations, with (2) tolerance of differences and adequate commonality of a desired future to politically steer where and how society moves. Where this is not the case, assessment-based knowledge and then aid can help by 'developing capacity'. It can also promote enabling changes to the socio-political environment which open space for citizens' dialogue and engagement. Typically, civil society is idealistically seen as a solution to, rather than as a source of, a society's problems.

Time shows that the results of aggregated assessment cannot be relied on to interpret 'transmission pathways' between configurations of civil society and their influence on governance and other functions that society depends on. Processes are idealized within a mono-cultured logic of western experience and implied convergence of all societies. Normative expectations embedded in assessments often ignore lessons from donors' own diverse, conflicted histories. Assessment measures often contain propositions about a positive relationship between civic engagement and enhancing democracy, for example through 'voice for accountability', that have proven problematic when actually financed (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000; Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008). The difficulty of CSO capacity development that endures outside of aid has also been seriously under-rated.

A general point is that the premises of many assessments do not hold true enough across highly divergent contexts to be reliable grounds for interpretation of the reality of civil society. An additional issue is that aggregate measures arrived at by assessments – for example the diamond or governance rankings – are course grained. They mask the particularities of country contexts and micro politics of personalities, power relations and compromised political systems that civil society is part of. Though not without value, caution is required when comparing within and across different types of assessments.

Methods: a close look at the CSI

Generating information and knowledge about civil society can be undertaken in ways that are 'neutral' or 'positive' in terms of their capacity-development potential. The former approach is typically associated with 'research' that follows the basic principle of separating subject from object of study. Increasing local capacity is not an explicit objective. A distinct approach is participatory action-research assessment. In this format, participation will not just create new knowledge but also renew energy and increase capacity to (collectively) act. The latter approach was and remains a critical, but problematic, feature of the CSI.

An issue of participatory assessment is responsibility for undertaking and supporting subsequent action. Here, the CIVICUS board made clear that, beyond assisting in identifying potential sources and connecting to ongoing programmes, CIVICUS could not take on a commitment to assist whatever action agenda resulted from a CSI exercise. There was simply no way of pre-determining what such a commitment might entail. This policy often proved a source of friction with the local host organization which, from the outset, was in the driving seat.

> By and large, when not housed in an academic institution, the CSI has dealt with host entities that exhibit variations on a theme of weakly rooted, aided NGO-ism. Their capability to act on CSO-generated knowledge processes is not a given.

Overall, action follow-up by local hosts has been very uneven.[10] In part this is due to the various types of local host – think tank, operational NGO, etc. They differ in terms of interests, capabilities, respect from other stakeholders, political resilience and credibility in moving from knowledge to action. By and large, when not housed in an academic institution, the CSI has dealt with host entities that exhibit variations on a theme of weakly rooted, aided NGO-ism. Their capability to act on CSO-generated knowledge processes is not a given. This step is often co-determined by commitment, donor configurations and the domestic politics in play. In addition, continuity of CSI-type efforts often depends on personalities and the nature of what action is considered necessary. Because this is not known in advance, follow-through has to be negotiated, often with new donor staff. These common conditions often make the CSI a one-off event rather than the catalyst for an action process. Unless funders already budget post-CSI support this barrier to follow up is likely to remain.

An additional obstacle is an assumption that the exercise would, by its very nature, add to stakeholders' capacity to act. This premise is questionable in that the substance of experiential learning from a CSI exercise is essentially logistical, knowledge-oriented, information 'extractive' and analytic. Acting to change socio-political conditions and quality of governance requires other capabilities. It also involves different types of risk and time frames. Recent work suggests that the multi-stakeholder basis of the CSI can, indeed, lend itself to capacity development if this is undertaken in a purposeful, facilitated way (Ubels et al, 2010). But, in terms of the capabilities to be developed, such effort will need to be oriented towards 'action not extraction'. At a minimum, some capacity and social capital will probably arise from the CSI investment. But one should not anticipate that this will naturally extend much beyond the central actors. In other words, unless designed-in, there is probably little down-stream or multiplier effect in capacity terms.

A further feature of methods is the extent to which assessments can move beyond a convenient starting point of capital city, urban settings, elites and the formal, 'visible' features of civic associational life. As argued above, robust assessments must include foundational, rural, informal and fluid forms of civic agency, such as social movements and networks, and the processes connecting them. Achieving this inclusion has proven costly and technically problematic. Doing so typically depends on funders' objectives and the amount of finance available relative to the scale of the country, its population density and degree of urbanisation. Practical limitations lead to significant reliance on proxy indicators, the views of informed observers and metrics derived from secondary sources. The latter are not necessarily mutually consistent in their categories and logics. Simply put, sound assessment is tricky and costly. Results are seldom comparatively robust. But they are often adequate for the purpose of stimulating debate and attention to a relatively neglected socio-political force and phenomenon.

Results against intentions

Looking across the terrain, participatory assessment has illuminated national features of civil society from which actions have emerged, albeit on modest scale. Where they occur, notable civic gains from CSI exercises are often predicated on the confluence of factors rather than a systematic outcome.

Primary assessment data comes from scoring separate dimensions. Second order analysis in country reports connects and interprets results in terms of explaining combinations of aggregate dimensional scores (Heinrich, 2007a). These can be used to explain – but not necessarily predict – why civil society looks and performs as it does. Third order analysis – of regions, themes and so on (Heinrich, 2007b) – can provide new grounds for gaining insights about determinants of socio-political trajectories. All these levels of analysis are valuable assets to users who know what they are looking for and why. For example, the Dutch Government has decided that monitoring and evaluation by NGOs receiving aid funds must use CSI categories to report on societal level changes. Despite the cautionary notes sounded, the CSI effort is a substantial achievement. If and how different users have relied on CSI data is worthy of systematic enquiry.

Together, the existing array of assessments have played a major, positive role in putting civil society onto a country's institutional landscape, establishing a language and discourse that is in the public arena and provided data and knowledge that better informs understanding of how societies work. It is reasonable to anticipate that, with the investment needed, second and third order analysis of the revised CSI (2008-2010) exercises will provide a similar rich data source. This will include repeats for some countries that may illuminate interesting changes in civil society over time. Despite the 'backlash' against civil society and negative post 9/11 effects on civil liberties (Fowler and Sen, 2010), this resource will have value for (inter)national efforts to increase or hold open civic space.

There is little doubt that, since the 1990s, great strides have been made in practically working out how to identify and assess civil society for a wide range of reasons and in diverse contexts. Nevertheless, in an evaluative sense, participatory assessments have, with variation and despite conscious attempts to the contrary, tended to:

1. Adopt generally exogenous (modernized, Western-informed) perspectives on civil society as an analytic category and its functions ;
2. Assume that a particular quality of citizenship is in play;
3. Overly homogenize findings to aid comparative analysis;
4. Focus more on actors than socio-political processes, particularly in relation to power (re)distribution corresponding to civil society as a political category;
5. Remain predominantly within the realm of the formally constituted expressions of civic agency;
6. Exhibit urban biases in terms of elite; perspectives and participation;
7. Have difficulty in capturing the layering of associational forms from local to (trans)national;
8. Underplay sub-national governance and other power arrangements as (potential) policy and action sites;
9. Be largely gender insensitive; and
10. Correspond to the interests of established, urban CSOs rather than the mass of citizens who make up what civic life and agency are all about.

Too often, one comes across descriptions of what civil society organizations do 'for' citizens as if they are not the very constituents of civil society itself. Such phrasing signals a deep, underlying conceptual problem which reflects a functional 'delivery' mindset at the cost of respecting civil society as a critical element of peoples' (collective) identity in constituting a polity. This latter perspective is central to changing governance.

> *A necessary assumption is that UNDP's policy commitment to governance will not diminish.*

The second phase version of the CSI (CIVICUS, 2010) seeks to tackle many such weaknesses. The extent to which it has been able to do so in practice remains to be seen. Without pre-supposing the ability or otherwise of the current CSI to show how the issues above can be resolved, the following section considers the bigger picture of tomorrow's participatory assessment. This reflection draws on the results of critical studies about governance and potentially relevant initiatives. It then narrows towards UNDP and its partners.

Where next with civil society assessment?

It can be argued that the time is ripe to consider new ideas about civil society assessments that complement but extend beyond existing logics and practices. Doing so starts with a broad view of the conceptual terrain of past and present participatory assessments. They share and rest on fundamental principles that need to be revisited. From here, it is possible to reflect on what an 'ideal' assessment would look like with an optic for UNDP. For illustrative purposes, African experience is referred to most.

A necessary assumption is that UNDP's policy commitment to governance will not diminish. Future assessment should therefore assist the organization to become more effective in putting this policy into practice. Strategically, UNDP's innovation in assessment can be designed to go hand in hand with what other aid agencies continue to do at national level.

Rethinking fundamentals

Civil society assessments are very diverse in scale, standards, measures, methods and costs. But they are similar in being located within a particular analytical framework. Despite many definitions of being (in) an 'arena' the logic involved has often been 'captured' by the notion of civil society as one 'sector' alongside state and market. The terms 'arena' and 'sector' are often used interchangeably. Yet their theoretical roots and meanings are different. This makes comparisons between assessments and their findings often confused and speculative rather than robust. Moreover, a tri-sector view often informs aid agencies' 'theory of change', leading to roles that are prescribed for an unproblematic community of NGOs/civil society that solves and does not cause socio-political problems. For reasons set out later, this framework of propositions and assumptions about civil society and governance does not adequately correspond to reality.

There are reasons to argue that the time has come for a different grounding for assessment. The first is to learn and move beyond want has and has not worked well across existing motives and methods. The *UNDP Users' Guide* (UNDP, 2010) with analysis of relative strengths and weaknesses of various extant methods of assessment is a valuable step in this direction. But a further level of analysis is required. This step would look across and combine from what is available to determine what a more realistic and coherent approach and substance of assessment would look like. Second, it is necessary to incorporate important progress made in civil society research and thinking over the past decade or so. In particular, this needs to happen in terms of 'de-sectoralising' mindsets to better comprehend how citizenship is expressed through many forms of civil society driven by civic energy with many motivations. These include internet-based social networks, Wikileaks-type activisms and diaspora associations that foster development 'back home'. The past clarity of a three-sector view of society is now distorting our understanding of the complex realities of how socio-politics are changing.

A future of civil society assessment therefore requires rethinking some fundamental ideas and assumptions. These are related to: (a) making citizenship and civic agency more explicit as the pre-condition and drivers of civil society; (b) correcting a misleading notion of a non-normative proposition for civil society; (c) redressing the subordination of endogenous concepts, categories and metrics; (c) reaffirming the place of politics in civil society discourse and measures.

> *The time has come for a different grounding for assessment.*

The 'citizen beyond sector' idea

Citizenship is an assumed pre-condition for civil society to exist and function. This principle is not always fulfilled. Nevertheless, it acts as the theoretical and practical grounding on which civil society assessments are undertaken. Recent research in this area brings to light issues that future assessments need to take into account. First, citizenship and civic agency are simultaneously individual and collective attributes of people who make up the polity. Citizenship – its rights and obligations – is independent of livelihood from businesses, government or elsewhere. Being a citizen does not stop when a person enters a government or insurance office or a factory. In gaining a (wage) livelihood, anyone can behave in locally defined pro-social or anti-social ways. During the hours of employment, membership of and obligations to civic associations does not stop either.[11] All these identities are lived at the same time and often overlap, for example into trade unions and mutual insurance associations.

A further issue to contend with is that the majority of the world's population is not formally employed.[12] In practice, separation between people in sectors makes less and less sense. Instead, the challenge of assessments is to take into account connections and power relations across institutions rather than isolate civil society

as an arena (Fowler and Biekart, 2008). A 'domain' way of doing so is described later.

In similar vein, a growing societal response to solving wicked problems is found in blending between 'sector' logics and measures of performance.[13] This trend is seen, for example, in social entrepreneurship, corporate social responsibility, the hybridization of non-profit organizations, the blurring of boundaries between state and non-state provision of public services and so on. These shifts have many sources generating collaboration as well as contention. Assessments that cannot cope with the blurring of institutional boundaries will be less and less in touch with reality.

> Is civil society a community or a mere aggregate of associations?

A next generation of assessments will also need to take into account research findings that challenge existing ideas about effective civic engagement. Evidence from some ten years of study indicate that the civic agency of community associations and social movements has a greater impact on improving governance than NGO lobbying and advocacy for policy reform (Gaventa and Barrett, 2010). An implication for assessment is to 'start from around and below', so to speak, driven by issues that citizens self-organize around. This would reduce reliance on assessing 'participation' by NGOs and elites that are often (semi-)detached from and not accountable to what is happening on the ground in the primary locations of associational life.

The normative idea

A major dividing line between assessments is the extent to which they are (self-)regarded as non-normative and value neutral. Where this is considered to be the case, comparisons can be legitimately made and robustly interpreted. However, this proposition is a fallacy. Normative features inform both data and its interpretation.

> *"Is civil society a community or a mere aggregate of associations? This question raises two issues of importance: the first*

is whether or not we like to fill the concept with a normative content, the second being what, if we take the former position, that normative content should be. It is significant that a majority of analysts and observers have treated civil society as an aggregate of organizations rather than as a community with a minimum of agreed-upon norms that define it. In short, civil society has been treated in a functionalist rather than normative manner.

The problem with these analysts is that they have implicitly assumed that civil society performs a positive role in development; more specifically, that it contributes to democratization. In this sense, these functionalists operate with a hidden normative agenda.[14] We know from empirical evidence, however, that not all civil society organizations are necessarily democratic or that they contribute to a more democratic society. Many organizations, such as a good number of NGOs in Africa, are not democratically constituted, but serve the interests of a very small group of persons" (Hyden, 2002).

Value-neutrality feeds into blindness for the un-civic features and behaviours of civil society that also drive change. All associations are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. This is not necessarily problematic until (violent) intolerance is added to exclusion. Any robust assessment of civil society cannot rely on a norm-free and 'harmony' model of change whose norms count is power-related. External actors need to be honest about the normative proposition that informs who they will and will not work with. Assessment still needs to capture the 'warts and all' of associational life, which the CSI did not manage to do.

Non-normative propositions are allied to another area that needs to be rethought for a next generation of assessment: exogenous versus endogenous prioritization.

The exogenous/endogenous idea

By and large, to make (country) comparisons possible – and despite attempts to respect local particularities – exogenous concepts and categories have been applied to assessment methods and data sets. This invites serious interpretation difficulties. For example:

> "…. there is a feature of African moral philosophy Ubuntu – 'I am because you are' - that permeates social relations civic agency and associational life in ways that seriously complicate research and measurement. It does so in a number of ways. One effect is to confuse and question both the utility and meaning of established terms such as philanthropy, altruism, generosity and the latter's supposed relationship to volunteering (Fowler and Wilkinson-Maposa, 2010). Another influence is on the way public institutions are (mis-) understood as autonomous entities with 'impermeable' borders that are not sensitive to inter-personal relations and other affinities (Bayat, 1993). For good and ill, African societies seldom work that way and this reality matters for how civil society is understood and functions. All in all, a case can be made for an African 'exceptionalism' that should be factored in to both the theory and method of measuring civil society" (Fowler, 2011).

Similar arguments against the subordination of particularisms to satisfy western-informed norms and standards that determine data acquisition and interpretation have been made by Dr. Amani Kandil, Executive Director of the Arab Network for NGOs in Egypt. She questions whether the very concepts used for civil society evaluation are relevant in the Arab region: "It is ... legitimate to ask ourselves whether these (Western) concepts and theories that were developed according to a specific economic (capitalist, liberal), political (democratic) and socio-cultural context (the civic culture), have succeeded to deal with the Arab reality" (UNDP, 2010: 2).

The next generation of assessments requires greater contextual rootedness in concepts, categories, measures and measurement. The international comparative emphasis of assessments has had its turn and is still useful for some purposes. But now it is time to deepen and disaggregate, so that assessments are more locally valid and meaningful.

> "It is legitimate to ask ourselves whether these (Western) concepts and theories that were developed according to a specific economic (capitalist, liberal), political (democratic) and socio-cultural context (the civic culture), have succeeded to deal with the Arab reality."

The politics and governance idea

Few, if any, assessments start with the fact that the concept of civil society stems from (contending) political theories. Despite the differences between them, all theories rely on the concept to analyse and explain power types, distribution and relations. As a primary proposition in undertaking assessment, power and politics are conspicuous by their absence or are obscured in terms such as governance or capacity development or empowerment. This common strategic choice makes assessments palatable to existing power holders. But regimes in developing countries know full well what lies behind these technical terms – pressure for political reform. The role of assessments in this agenda will remain sensitive no matter what the language.

> "Governance describes the way countries and societies manage their affairs politically and the way power and authority are exercised. For the poorest and most vulnerable, the difference that good, or particularly bad, governance makes to their lives is profound: the inability of government institutions to prevent conflict, provide basic security, or basic services can have life-or-death consequences; lack of opportunity can

prevent generations of poor families from lifting themselves out of poverty; and the inability to grow economically and collect taxes can keep countries trapped in a cycle of aid-dependency" (DFID, 2010:ii).

From the perspective of citizens, interfacing with the power of the state occurs at many locations in many ways. This lived reality makes implementation of reforms more important than attaining 'progressive' policy statements and political gestures that agencies can be proud of. New approaches to assessment need to pay direct attention to the multiple sites at which governance plays out. State power through policy and coercion is exerted at many administrative levels. It is also located in semi-state institutions, lives within civil society itself – for example in a constitutional role for traditional leadership – and in political representatives and appointees. Put another way, it is time to adopt an assessment optic from below into policy as experienced by citizens rather than from the above of policy reform as intended. This shift will help engage assessment towards the deep politics that robust, as opposed to symbolic, democracy requires.

"Evidence shows that in order to deliver sustainable international development we must be able to understand and work with its politics" (DFID, 2010:i).

Rethinking the approach

The repertoire of approaches to civil society assessment is eclectic. This situation corresponds to the diversity of factors that inform what is wanted, for whose benefit, why, where and when, as well as the resources available. The result is a rich but disjointed array of frameworks, data sets, findings and applications to policy and practice. This condition offers a valuable opportunity to carefully sift through what is available. The objective would be to design an approach that is both more coherent and better able to interrogate specific areas, or domains, of interest to different stakeholders. Obviously, this does not mean that existing tools and approaches cannot still be applied if new countries wish to embark on assessment or track changes over time. The

challenge, in my view, is also to move beyond the limitations of the framework in which they are embedded in order to embrace the four ideas described above. Two suggestions for doing so are provided. A concluding section speculates on what, for UNDP and its partners, an ideal assessment might look like in principle.

Tiered coherence

The *UNDP Users' Guide to Civil Society Assessments* (2010) recognizes a naturally grown division between organizational and sector-wide methods, stakeholders and users. So far, it has not been possible to bring consistency between existing assessment set-ups in terms of substance, processes and scales of coverage.

> *"Evidence shows that in order to deliver sustainable international development we must be able to understand and work with its politics."*

Moreover, civil society organizations also function and connect at multiple scales as multi-actor systems. New approaches to assessment would do well to take up a multi-tiered analytic framework and practical tasks. By this I mean to adopt a layered assessment perspective similar to that found in the traditional framing of capacity development: individual -> organizational -> institutional. That is to study how civil society formations operate at and connect from (very) local and micro, through meso to macro arrangements. Careful selection of categories should make this possible, bearing in mind that the issue is not to aggregate. Instead, assessment seeks to gain insights about connectivity and its density as a critical factor in civil society evolution, social capital and impact on governance.

Domain orientation

A practical and cost effective way of undertaking a tiered approach is by selecting a domain of societal change to systematically investigate how civil society functions in the relationships and processes involved. In other words, to couple civil society with the operating environment of other actors rather than separating it as an 'arena' not imbued with cross-boundary transactions. A

domain could be 'anti-corruption', countering xenophobia, reducing incidence of HIV/AIDS, enabling social economy, electoral reform that reduces exclusion, etc. Assessing civil society in relation to a domain of interest to local stakeholders – as owners – would better expose processes and the types of power in play as well as the capacities called upon to make governance work as intended.[15]

This perspective of development as a multi-actor, multi-level process has potential to ensure that participants are less involved in an information-extractive exercise. In other words, ownership and action have a greater opportunity to emerge at many locations in a domain of change, with less susceptibility to urban and elite biases.

An ideal assessment post-2015

What, *in principle*, would characterise an ideal civil society assessment, post-2015 for UNDP and its partners? It is assumed that governance is still the critical focal point for UNDP's policy towards civil society engagement. An initial, cutting edge, answer that will require detailed exploration might look something like this. The starting point is to revisit UNDP's take on the interface between civil society and governance. From here, ideas about ideal characteristics of participatory assessment follow.

Citizenship and civic agency are starting points that assessment relies on. There is an increasing availability of documented instances where civic energy is the driver of socio-political change. An accumulation of cases is now available associated with studies in this area.[16] The World Social Forum is a venue where this type of local to global action is globally exhibited. What needs to be looked for in focussing assessment are sites of civic energy that may have been supported and amplified by aid, but have not been its origin.

Assessment is directed at domains of relevance to specific stakeholders. From the point of view of civic engagement, a domain is a combination of actors and processes that have influence on a desired socio-political change in how governance is exercised for whom. A domain

can provide a consistent way of both connecting assessments across tiers of civic organizing. Examples are local bodies that manage natural resources that federate and interface with different levels of public administration (McGinnis, 1999). Other examples are alliances of civic organizations that organize locally to protect minority rights. The point about a domain is that it can include all types of institutions and organizations that make sense in terms of the issue at hand. It is not sectoral in its starting point or way of framing assessment. It can be gender sensitive. Multi-stakeholder processes in development offer examples that assessment can draw on.[17] Methods developed for local governance assessment by the UNDP Governance Oslo Centre offer additional interesting possibilities, but a domain approach calls for a less actor-centric and more systemic view determining categories and measures. Country by country choices will need to be made about domain priorities.

> *Neutrality is not an option. The aid agenda has a normative position that needs to be politically managed.*

UNDP's strategy towards governance becomes poly-centred and concerned with citizens' impact on policy implementation as well as formulation. The authority to translate policy into practice is seldom centralised. Citizens therefore face many institutional types and locations where governance plays out and can be influenced. The Kwanda initiative in one location is now going to national scale in South Africa. It is an example where the principles of civic agency and civic-driven change gain traction on local and national government and on the behaviour of businesses in terms of their community responsibility. In policing, for example, Kwanda experiences have pushed changes to how local, provisional and national security policies are being implemented.[18] Kwanda's starting point is to increase people's ability to self-organize as an endogenous process.

Assessment concepts, categories, scales and methods are endogenously validated for the context in which they are to be applied. The Johns Hopkins study on non-profit organizations across the world included a civil society study in South Africa. The method employed differed from other countries by starting with a survey of what associational life people were part of. It found, for example, that some 54 per cent of associations were not formally registered but none the less played an important and reliable place in people's lives (Swilling and Russell, 2002). Such micro-based designs that correspond to local appreciations of civil society and agency can, but do not need to, have a national scale. Nevertheless, being domain-related means that local experiences of civic agency can connect to national policy arenas. Micro-based assessment methods – with many examples from monitoring and evaluation – also embody values considered to be locally relevant.[19] External agencies like UNDP will be forced to make a choice about which value sets they wish to work for and against. Neutrality is not an option. The aid agenda has a normative position that needs to be politically managed. Recognizing value pre-dispositions helps prevent assessments that have prejudicial blind spots. Domain-oriented assessments help identify countervailing civic forces to intended change as well as to the roots of problems and the power involved.

Moving a civil society assessment agenda forward will be both challenging and valuable. There is adequate practical experience and study to consider a significant change in understanding the relationship between civil society and governance. That is to move from assumptions about universal processes to more historically determined pluralism. A hope is that this paper will assist UNDP in its reflections on where next with civil society assessment.

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[1] To date CSI-based assessments have been carried out in some 64 countries. Repeat assessments are now being undertaken in some of them.

[2] Wicked problems have multiple inter-dependent causes and multiple possible solutions which may or may not be amenable to practical implementation.

[3] Some 178 measures are used to classify and compare countries (Harris, Moore and Schmitz, 2009).

[4] For example, the CSI was never capable of being an 'index' in its proper sense. The term 'Index' was introduced and held on to mainly for 'marketing' reasons in terms of people's familiarity with other international indices.

[5] The recent *UNDP Users' Guide* is a valuable piece of work in this regard (UNDP, 2010)

[6] Substantial literature points to the embedded, normative nature of supposedly scientifically objective studies.

[7] NGO-ism refers to a set of anticipated roles, forms, language and theory of change that are conventional wisdoms, deployed for both legitimate public purposes and self-serving motives. The label NGO cannot be relied on to designate any commonly agreed meaning.

[8] Despite attempts to establish a truly 'international' definition on the one hand, or to recognize and work with local understandings on the other, external impetus and resourcing has imposed a western-centred conceptualization of what is to be assessed.

[9] The CSI process shows that local host organizations may simply buy in to the civil society definition for want of not being in a position to offer an alternative.

[10] Reflections on 'action' after a CSI exercise can be found in a number of evaluations which will be complemented by cases to be produced alongside this paper.

[11] Corruption through social, 'old boy' and other networks is one sign of this reality.

[12] Some 27 per cent are under 14 years of age and 7.6 per cent are over 65. Unemployment, non wage employment and the informal economy relegate formal wage employment to a minority source of livelihood globally.

[13] State logic is regulation; business logic is accumulation; civil society logic is interest realization; and family logic is reproduction.

[14] An associated, deeper lying narrative assumption is a convergence of all states towards modernity exhibited in the developed world.

[15] For power analysis see: http://www.powercube.net/

[16] www.ids.ac.uk

[17] http://portals.wdi.wur.nl/msp/

[18] www.kwanda.org

[19] See, for example, the M&E list serve <pelican@dgroups.org>

II

THE HEALTH OF CIVIL SOCIETY: IS THIS WHAT IS BEING ASSESSED?

Richard Holloway

Introduction

Civil society assessments are very likely performed by people and organizations that are positively inclined towards civil society and would like to use such assessments to improve and strengthen the sector. They may also use the assessments to strengthen their position as important players in the civil society arena. If we assess the process of the assessments, however, we have to make sure that we all have the same understanding of our target – namely, civil society. We should particularly remember the cautionary statement of CIVICUS that to define civil society is like "trying to nail a pudding to the wall". The essay that follows may use the term 'civil society' in ways different from how the term is used in many of the civil society assessments listed by UNDP, and it is important therefore to set out my stall at the start of the discussion.[1]

For me the best exposition comes from Michael Edwards's book *Civil Society* (Edwards, 2009). He suggests that civil society has three elements – as associational life, as the good society, and as the public sphere. As he says (p. 123), civil society is "simultaneously a goal to aim for, a means to achieve it, and a framework to engage with others about ends and means". If we are looking at those who promote the idea of civil society assessments, we have to ask ourselves whether they are assessing civil society by these ideas or not, and whether these assessments are aiming to improve and strengthen the same civil society as we have in mind.

This is important because the majority of the discourse about civil society and civil society assessments is under the umbrella of the international aid industry. Apart from discussions at universities (and some of these are subsidised by the aid industry) it is donor agencies which promote civil society in the south; they promote civil society within discourses bounded by the aid industry; they fund civil society organizations and they fund the organizations which carry out the assessments of civil society. Edwards clarifies this very vividly:

> "*If associational life and its effects are as complicated as described* (in previous pages), *then any attempt to influence them through foreign aid or government intervention will be replete with difficulty and danger. Yet the approach of the civil society building industry that has proliferated since 1989 – with some exceptions – resembles a crude attempt to manipulate associational life in line with Western, and specifically North American, liberal democratic templates: pre-selecting organizations that donors think are most important (advocacy NGOs or other vehicles for elites, for example, usually based in capital cities) ignoring domestic expressions of citizen action that do not conform to western expectations (such as informal, village or clan based associations in Africa and the Islamic world, more radical social movements, and pre-political formations, spreading mistrust and rivalry as fledgling groups compete for foreign aid, and creating a backlash when associations are identified with foreign interests. (....) the aid industry resembles a bulldozer driven by someone convinced that they are heading in the right direction, but following a map made for another country at another time.*"

If most of those involved in civil society assessments are positively inclined towards civil society, why is it that the paragraph quoted above well describes what happens when the aid industry gets involved in civil society? Can we tease out the process by which there seems to be a mismatch between those who design and

support assessment efforts and the results that come from these? It seems that, with the best will in the world, organizations that are enthusiastic about the value and usefulness of civil society, often end up identifying and supporting a very limited range of civil society organizations, and not necessarily those which represent the features of civil society that are most valued and prized.

Civil society: beyond NGOs

The first and fundamental problem of the mismatch between those who want to support civil society and those who undertake civil society assessments is their understanding of what kinds of organizations are meant by the term 'civil society'. When they advertise their interest in civil society and civil society organizations it is easily assumed that everyone has the same understanding of what is meant. Most assume that those eligible to join in the exercise are the public benefit development organizations which use funds from the aid industry and which are in some way formal, i.e., are registered with the government, have legal persona, and have some formal organizational structure, and are quite possibly members of some CSO coordinating and representative body. It is not that these categories are overtly imposed and those who do not fit these categories are excluded – it is simply that it is assumed that anyone interested in civil society organizations will gravitate towards such organizations.

> *"The aid industry resembles a bulldozer driven by someone convinced that they are heading in the right direction, but following a map made for another country at another time."*

The fact is, however, that civil society comprises much, much more than such formal civil society organizations, and, I would argue, the large numbers of CSOs outside such boundaries are much more important for the health of society than the formal ones inside the boundaries. Those who organize civil society assessments, however, in my experience, are likely to think that civil society is represented by this limited set of organizations, *de facto* if not *de jure.*

To take three examples: In Bulgaria, in the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, I was asked by USAID to conduct an overview and assessment of Bulgarian civil society, its strengths and weaknesses. The organizations to which I was directed were all Bulgarian NGOs set up by US INGOs, and 100 per cent dependent on USAID funding. We all knew that their life blood was foreign funding, that they had no roots in their own society (although engaging interested and committed individuals), and that they were modelled on western examples. They were more like contractors to USAID than indigenous civil society organizations. This is not to say that they were useless – those working on human rights had a very important role, but, at that time, they were not indigenous citizens' organizations. Looking more widely in Bulgarian society for CSOs which were not relics of soviet centrally controlled organizations, or transplants from America, I came across *Chitalishte* – folk song and folk dance societies which, in the crises of post soviet times, had taken on wider tasks.[2] USAID did not know of their existence or of their importance to the people of Bulgaria. UNDP investigated them further, supported and promoted them.

In Timor Leste, there were many indigenous clandestine societies before its independence from Indonesia. Following independence, many CSOs were supported by foreign funds for a variety of reconstruction and development tasks – some of which evolved from the clandestine organizations. Their impact was small, however, and while they were not clones of foreign NGOs, as in Bulgaria, they could not be said to be locally supported or to have roots in their own society. The organizations to which almost every inhabitant of Timor Leste belonged, however, were clans (*lia nain*) based around sacred houses, which had the authority to manage traditional society and issue rules and regulations (like *tara bandu* for control of the environment). Such organizations were not members of the NGO Forum of Timor Leste, and were either not known to the aid industry, or not

considered developmental. They did not appear in CIVICUS Civil Society Index of East Timor.[3]

Thirdly, in Mali, ONGs (Organisations Non-Gouvernementales) mean development NGOs, registered and dependent on foreign funding with all the problems that this implies. Mali has, however, an astonishingly large range of citizens' organizations for education, health care, land use, conflict mediation, small scale trading, savings, and women's solidarity – particularly the Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) called *tontines*.[4] It also has a very diverse collection of Islamic associations and traditional organizations, like the Association des Chasseurs. None of these were included in the USAID NGO Sustainability Index for Sub-Saharan Africa (2009).

This is not, with one possible exception, a deliberate attempt to exclude such types of organizations from civil society assessments: it is simply that officials in aid agencies, government officials, and the NGOs themselves consider that the 'usual suspects' in the case of anything called 'civil society' are development NGOs which very rarely include membership organizations. Even CIVICUS, a world leader in civil society thinking, finds its World Assembly populated with NGOs, to the extent that Kumi Naidoo, then head of CIVICUS, in Glasgow 2008 made a point of announcing that they had managed to attract trade unions that year, for the first time.

The possible exception mentioned above concerns the complicated world of NGO politics. When there is strong pressure from donors (and sometimes from governments) to demonstrate the numbers and importance of CSOs, it may be that the CSO coordinating and representative organizations will be motivated to show the size and importance of developmental, donor-funded CSOs in the country and will therefore intentionally only contact and work with those kinds of CSOs, ignoring those that are off the radar screens of donors and government.

It is more likely, however, that it is a self-imposed limitation. Neither donors, nor governments, nor NGO coordinating bodies, nor indeed other CSOs will normally expand their horizons to include CSOs which are not obviously developmental or foreign-funded because operationally they consider only such CSOs important to the sector. In theoretical discussions about the nature and importance of civil society, they may well include clan-based, faith-based, informal and traditional organizations, but in researching CSOs from the perspective of a donor, they are likely to concentrate on CSOs which receive funding from donors.

Civil society comprises much more than formal civil society organizations, and the large numbers of civil society organizations outside such boundaries are much more important for the health of society than the formal ones inside the boundaries.

It is interesting to observe the varied perspectives of civil society actors about their ostensible colleagues in civil society. In Pakistan, many faith-based Islamic organizations like *madrassahs* and *qanqahs* will make a point of saying that they are not NGOs, because for them, NGOs means foreign-funded, and unacceptably foreign-influenced organizations. In Indonesia, YAPPIKA, the organization which carried out the CIVICUS CSI, found great difficulty in bringing trade unions and chambers of commerce to the discussion fora since the latter did not see how such discussions were relevant to them. In Bangladesh, the erstwhile Communist Party of Bangladesh, once it had broken up in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, was very apprehensive about being thought of as an NGO or CSO because it had always made a point of repudiating NGOs as foreign-funded actors which avoided getting involved in politics, and 'diluted' the revolution.[5]

A comparative view

It is instructive to look at three important examples of civil society assessments, namely the CIVICUS CSI, the Johns Hopkins University's Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, and the USAID NGO Sustainability Index, and review them

from the perspective of their interest in the larger field of civil society organizations, versus their interest in donor-funded, developmental CSOs. These are the common factors:

1. All of them are funded by the aid industry;
2. All of them have designed a methodology which they offer to local organizations to use (and which has only marginal flexibility to local adaptation);
3. All of them engage a local organization, which in their opinion is both involved with civil society and is competent to undertake research;
4. All of them train the implementing organization in their methodology;
5. All of them help the contracted organization to finalise, edit, and polish their research;
6. All of them are interested in using the information obtained for comparisons between countries ;
7. All of them are interested in disseminating the information publicly.

I suggest that these three models are pertinent examples for other civil society assessment efforts. The common factor here is the aid industry, which is interested in the kinds of CSOs it is likely to fund, and which, therefore, working directly or mediating its work through other organizations like CIVICUS, seeks information on a specialised set of CSOs, rather than information on the whole of civil society.

This is perfectly defensible if the objective is to understand more about the extent, reach, issues and problems of foreign-funded CSOs which are an important sub-set of civil society, but it is limited by the same factors that limit the work of such CSOs, namely that they are:

1. Not necessarily rooted in their own societies, but operate more as contractors to foreign aid, and exist as long as the foreign aid continues;
2. Unlikely to be financially self-reliant, but, on the contrary, likely to be serially dependent on foreign funding, which comes in tranches administratively convenient to donors.

3. Unlikely to get involved in issues that are considered political by donors, even when, at certain times, involvement in politics is needed.[6]

The great advantage of the unregistered and informal CSOs is that they are, by contrast, deeply rooted in their own societies, likely to be financially supported by members (and thus have a natural cut-off if they are felt by their members to be unhelpful), and prepared to operate to the limits that citizens in their own country can operate.

Understanding grassroots organizations

Organizations which have strong local roots, local support and local action may well have limitations in their development thinking, and need to learn the ways in which they can deal with problems experienced by their members. Both aspects are important, but, "You cannot do development to others, people have to do development for themselves" (Anderson and Woodrow, 1998). My feeling is that civil society assessments, because they are assessing a limited sub-set of CSOs, are missing out a large number of others which may have greater impact on the quality of life (because they are rooted in their own societies, and not dependent on foreign funds), and the assessments would be more helpful if they consistently sought this larger universe.

Donors would also benefit from a more adventurous approach to the variety of possible citizens' organizations. An example from Indonesia and UNICEF illustrates this: in traditional Indonesian society, particularly Javanese society, (and Javanese culture has permeated Indonesia widely), it is very common to have 'arisan', which are a local variety of ROSCA, and usually take place amongst women. They are arranged informally and locally and have the purpose of depositing savings together, and accumulating a monthly 'pot' which is taken by a different person every month, thus allowing one person to accumulate assets which they would find hard to do on their own. UNICEF's field staff noticed that, in the social interaction that

accompanied meetings of the *arisan*, mothers often brought their babies and compared notes with other mothers about how they were doing, putting on weight, illnesses etc. UNICEF staff introduced to these gatherings the idea of baby weighing and the linked suggestions for better diet or nutrition for those whose babies were less than the expected weight for age. This way of working has now become the standard way for the Ministry of Health to approach infant nutrition. '*Arisan*' are unregistered, unfunded, and unknown outside their communities, and would be unlikely to turn up on a civil society assessment. UNICEF did its own exploratory research, but such organizations could have been identified for donors by a civil society assessment with a larger remit than is usual. In my opinion, a civil society assessment that does not think in such terms is the poorer for it.

Another example – from UNICEF again, this time in Zambia – does not touch so much on a solution as on a problem. The large epidemic of HIV/AIDS in Zambia has meant a serious increase in deaths. In Zambia, as in many African societies, funeral societies or associations are responsible for the rituals associated with burial. This usually involves the larger extended family of the deceased collecting firewood and food and sitting up all night at the graveside, singing, and eating. Not only is this becoming an ever greater burden on poor people to provide the wood and food, but it also means that many such participants over the nights vigil are bitten by mosquitoes and catch malaria, some of whom die. UNICEF considered it a perfect opportunity for educating people about malaria prevention, use of bed-nets etc., and considered funeral societies a relevant target for such suggestions.

A slightly different take on burial societies comes from Ethiopia where the '*iddir*', traditional burial societies, were the only non-governmental organizations that were allowed to exist during the time of the Stalinist Dergue. Because they continued, and because humankind seems to have an innate desire to associate together to overcome common problems, the '*iddir*' started to accumulate functions, and became local self-help

and community organizations, local savings and borrowing societies.[7]

Neither *iddir*, nor Zambian burial societies are likely to be noted in a civil society assessment for all the reasons given above – they are unregistered, unfunded by outsiders and extremely local.

> *"You cannot do development to others, people have to do development for themselves."*

All this points to the need for a systematic appraisal of civil society and civil society organizations in any country that is undertaking an assessment. This exercise should identify (a) what exists, (b) their extent and reach, (c) their usual activities and (d) their development potential. Those undertaking a civil society assessment, likely to be locals of the country concerned, will not need to be educated about the nature of these organizations – they probably were very familiar with them as they grew up, but will need to be told that such organizations are also part of civil society, and it is important to assess them, as well as the more regularly contacted foreign-funded, developmental organizations. It seems to me that this is a useful role for UNDP – to make sure that those carrying out civil society assessments start from such a wide review exercise.

This is certainly not the way in which the USAID NGO Sustainability Index (NGOSI) has been operationalised. This is not very surprising since NGOSI started as a way of assessing the impact on society of the CSOs that USAID helped to create in Eurasia and Central Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is also not the way in which the JHU Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project was operationalised, for it only counted formal civil society organizations (in spite of rhetoric to the contrary):

> "*The relatively limited presence of civil society organizations in the developing and transitional countries* (i.e. the ones that the project counted – author's comment) *does not, of course, necessarily mean the*

absence of helping relationships in these countries. To the contrary, many of these countries have strong traditions of familial, clan, or village networks that perform many of the same functions as civil society institutions." (Salomon et al, 2004)

This was the way that the CSI was meant to operate – please see *Assessing the Health of Civil Society – A Handbook for Using the CIVICUS Index on Civil Society as a Self-Assessment Tool* (CIVICUS, 2004), where there were clear suggestions for looking systematically at the range of civil society organizations for the purposes of the assessment (Holloway, 2001).

The suggested categories were:

A. Mutual Benefit Organizations
1. *Faith-based organizations*
2. *Indigenous CBOs*
3. *Introduced CBOs*
4. *Ethnic/traditional organizations*
5. *Political parties (a debatable category)*
6. *Employment related organizations (trade unions, professional associations, trade associations)*
7. *Cooperatives (a debatable category)*
8. *People's/mass organizations*
9. *Student Organizations*
10. *Recreational/cultural organizations*

B. Public Benefit Organizations
1. *Private philanthropic bodies*
2. *Public philanthropic bodies*
3. *Faith-based organizations*
4. *Location based organizations (home town organizations)*
5. *Civic organizations*
6. *NGOs*
   - *Implementing*
   - *Advocacy*
   - *Networking*
   - *Research and think tanks*
   - *Capacity building/support NGOs*
   - *Representative NGOs*

I believe that, whatever the rhetoric, most civil society assessments in fact concentrate on B.6 – NGOs, and miss out on all of A: Mutual Benefit Organizations.

Towards a shared understanding of civil society

It is not just the data collected that is important in civil society assessments and in assessments of the health of civil society – it is the process by which CSOs, governments and businesses think through the information that is collected, and reflect upon it. Central to this is the selection of who is present in that reflection process, and how it is conducted.

One way to understand this is through the commonly reproduced diagram of the relations between civil society and other sectors in society - the familiar three circles diagram in which government and business intersect and overlap at the margins of their circles.

A more useful understanding of the relations between the three comes from the following diagram, in which the segment where all three sectors overlap is designated as civil society.
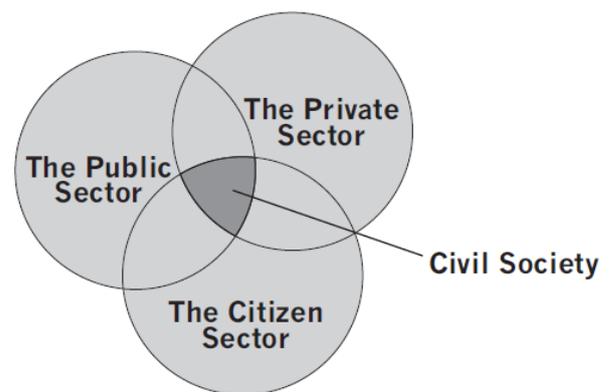
This conceptual way of understanding civil society as more than the totality of civil society organizations is underpinned by a quotation from Johns Hopkins University:

"A true 'civil society' is not one where one or the other of these sectors is in the ascendance, but rather one in which there are three more of less distinct sectors – government, business and the non-profit – that nevertheless find ways to work together in responding to public needs. So conceived, the term 'civil society' would not apply to a particular sector, but to a relationship among the sectors, one in

which a high level of cooperation and mutual support prevailed. (…) What this suggests is that developing mutually supportive relationships between the non-profit sector and the state, and with the business community as well, may be one of the highest priorities for the promotion of democracy as well as economic growth throughout the world." (Salomon and Anheier, 1994)

According to this way of thinking, it is essential that representatives of government, business and the organized citizenry sit together and look at the data collected in a civil society assessment to think through how all these parties can help to promote good society and democracy. Nearly all civil society assessments have as one of their features a forum in which people informed and knowledgeable about civil society organizations consider the information collected and reflect on what needs to be done next to improve the position of civil society. The suggestion now is that representatives of all three parties together think about the good society, the civil society that they would like to see. The ability to do this is not necessarily within the skill set of the kinds of CSOs that undertake civil society assessments. It is however such an important part of the work that CSOs who manage civil society assessments may either contract it to others, or develop their own capacity to do it.

The discussions between key stakeholders when the information from the assessment has come in is a very important part of the work – where the often missing ingredient of civil society in national analyses can be shown to have as important a role in national life as government or business. As an analogy we can look at the other kind of work with which CSOs are very familiar – the Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool. Once the scoring of an organization against the norms of a model organization is completed, comes the most important part of the work – the discussion within the CSO as to what these scores mean, what it tells the Board and staff about the way the CSO works, and what are the gaps between its present reality and its desired future shape. In just the same way as with a civil society assessment, an OCAT facilitator may need different skills to manage all the important future directed discussions.

This understanding of civil society as the desired good society responds to the truism that any member of society, whether from government, business, or organized citizenry can play a role in civil society. As well as working for the government or for the private sector, an individual can be, for example, a member of an alumni association of school or university, a member of a tribe or clan, a member of a religious congregation, a member of a chamber of commerce or a union, a member of a men's or women's group, and a supporter of an organization that reflects his or her concerns (cancer, children with disabilities, clean government, pollution control, etc).

This understanding of civil society as the desired good society responds to the truism that any member of society, whether from government, business, or organized citizenry, can play a role in civil society.

My own experience, with the Aga Khan Foundation, of successful civil society assessments in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (originally handled by Allavida) was that it was a joint approach to thinking of the kind of society these countries wanted that was valuable. These joint discussions focused on the role of civil society, what was holding them back, what could make them more successful – and this led to changes in the law on civil society, and to the creation of government-CSO fora and round table events. From the start Allavida made sure that all stakeholders were not just enumerating or surveying CSOs, but re-thinking what the role of CSOs might be in the nation.

Digesting all these ideas leads me to the following recommendations for UNDP to consider:

1. Be clear that the purpose of the civil society assessment is to assess the health of civil society as a whole and its place in a healthy society, and make sure this is agreed with the funders of the assessment.

2. Have a systematic outline of the different kinds of associational life in the country being assessed, and survey these systematically to understand the reach, size, impact, and value to civil society of these organizational forms.

3. Make sure that those whose job is to collect information in the assessment are well oriented and trained in this thinking.

4. Wherever possible bring the leaders of such organizations to the final discussion about the contribution of different organizations to a civil society in the country. This will mean a lot of use of translators from local languages.

5. Make sure that the final forum and discussion that derives from the data collected involve all sectors, represented and thinking of themselves as citizens interested in a better society, and not simply representatives of a particular sector.

[1] UNDP (2010). *A Users' Guide to Civil Society Assessments*. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

[2] Aga Khan Development Network and INTRAC (June 2007). *Beyond NGOs – Civil Society Organisations with Development Impact*. Geneva. See Chapter 12 – Cultural Associations.

[3] Holloway, R. (2004). *What is Civil Society in Timor Leste?* Dili.

[4] Beridogo, M. (2006). *Information de base sur le secteur de la Société Civile au Mali*. AKDN.

[5] Holloway, R. (1998). *Supporting Citizens' Initiatives – Bangladesh NGOs and Society*. London: Practical Action.

[6] The "Arab Spring" in 2011 has shown us that development work is heavily constrained by political authoritarianism (the more so development work by CSOs). It has also shown that political reform is a necessary precursor to effective development programmes. The Arab Spring (particularly in Egypt) has also brought many new actors into civil society, often linked to Facebook, and other social networks.

[7] Aga Khan Development Network Civil Society Programme and INTRAC (June 2007). *Beyond NGOs. Civil Society Organisations with Development Impact.* Chapter 3B: Traditional indigenous community organisations. Iddir – Burial Societies of Ethiopia.

III

<h1 style="text-align:right">FROM ASSESSMENTS TO FORECASTING</h1>

<div style="text-align:right">Helmut Anheier</div>

Background and reflections

The profile of strengths and weaknesses of specific tools for civil society assessments has to be judged against the fact that there are now many such tools available – and for different users and uses. Ten or so years ago, a paucity of civil society indicators of any kind prevailed, and we would not even have been able to pose the questions alongside. Today, we have a range of tools to choose from, as demonstrated by the UNDP Users' Guide to Civil Society Assessments (2010), which presents an impressive number of tools: indicator systems, data collection and reporting frames, as well as various assessments and rankings. The Guide also reveals that the various tools vary considerably in intent, theoretical grounding, methodological sophistication and practicability. This makes an assessment of available tools rather challenging as we are easily tempted to compare apples and oranges. In my view, the weaknesses in the eyes of some may well be key strengths for others.

For example, for economists, the UN's satellite account for nonprofit institutions[1], based on the assumptions and methodologies of the UN System of National Accounts (SNA), has its key strengths precisely in that it adheres to the same assumptions and employs the same methodologies as other satellite accounts and the overall SNA system generally. For economists accustomed to the SNA, the notion that the satellite account has a weakness – because there is no participation by civil society actors – would be alien.

By contrast, the SNA approach would indeed be unsatisfactory to proponents of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index and related ways of measuring civil society, for whom participation by civil society stakeholders is an important component of the overall assessment exercise. From a CIVICUS CSI perspective, the UN's satellite account for non-profit institutions is primarily a system measuring monetary variables needed the estimate the GDP and related indicators, and remains limited to just one of the four CSI dimensions. It is also important to note that any measurement technique is a simplification of the phenomenon it seeks to measure.

Although we have more tools on civil society than ever before, it is also important to keep in mind how 'young' this field as such still is. Indicator and measurement systems in economics and sociology (the leading indicator-producing social sciences) have already had decades to develop, going back to the 1930s for economics and to the 1960s for social indicators, when more systematic and comprehensive systems were put in place. Economic statistics in particular had much more funding than civil society research had, and most likely ever will have.

Despite both factors, the relative newness and poor funding of the field, much progress has been made, especially since the year 2000. Fortunately, the next decade seems to present a fertile climate to build on the achievements made, and to push for the kind of empirical assessment and reporting on civil society indicators that is still so greatly needed. There are five reasons for this optimism:

- Social indicators research is experiencing a renaissance, in part as a reaction to the failure of narrow measures of economic and financial aspects of societies.
- The SNA community, long the stalwart of strict economic reasoning on how to systematize and measure economies, is opening up and moving away from the model of an industrial economy based on manufacturing and national economies.[2]

- In addition, conceptual corrections, if not alternatives, to GDP are being pushed by some economists and discussed by some governments and international bodies.[3]
- The success of the UNDP Human Development Index and the clever tracking and presentation of the Millennium Development Goals have demonstrated the use of combining economic and non-economic data such as infant mortality and other health-related measures, education and environmental aspects for an important set of stakeholders.
- Civil society, both as a concept and as an institutional system, has entered the mindsets and policy frameworks that make better empirical mapping and reporting necessary, and hence require adequate tools. Indications of this are the United Nations' extensive website on civil society and UN-civil society relations[4] and similar platforms in the European Union[5] or the World Bank.[6]

All this is good, but one needs to ask: why this need for more and better information on civil society – regionally, nationally and increasingly also transnationally, even at the global level? The answer is simple but full of implications: we need better information because of politically felt needs that civil society is and will be growing in importance. This seems to be a commonplace among those proposing civil society tools of one kind or another, for the social sciences tell us that information leads to knowledge and understanding, and hence to influence and power. Thus, the various attempts to come up with improved and more comprehensive and strategic tools are ultimately also political: they are about understanding how some civil society actors can substantiate their claims, aspirations and performance vis-à-vis others, in particular state and market institutions, and vice versa.

So tools and measures are about legitimacy. Civil society actors need better data to further or defend their positions; nations and inter-governmental organizations (e.g., UNDP, EU), businesses, influential individuals and eminent persons need data to find out if civil society in general or specific actors in particular are partners or adversaries, allies or opponents, neutral, negligible, part of the problem or the solution.

It is around issues of legitimacy and politics (in a broad sense) that we find fundamental tensions in the field of civil society research. These tensions go well beyond concerns about certain strengths and weaknesses of various tools, approaches and measurements, however pronounced, or concerns about how reliable and valid representations of civil society reality are in particular settings or for specific purposes.

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So what are these tensions? They are well known, to be sure, but what sets them apart is that they have largely been neglected, in part because civil society actors, and not academics and policymakers, were the first to ask and push for data and better information. These actors came with certain expectations, one being that tools be enabling and participatory. However, these are not necessarily the expectations of academics and policymakers – hence there are built-in tensions from the beginning. Whereas in other fields (e.g., finance indicators, health care or education-related indicators, measures of government spending and debt), these tensions come to the surface, those responsible for civil society tools and their development have sidestepped or even avoided them, aided perhaps by a certain ideology of assumed righteousness and 'alternative politics.' The tensions are between:

- The academic community and policymakers
- Practitioners and policymakers
- Practitioners and academics

Each of these groups can and should develop their own tools and measurement systems according to their explicit needs and expectations, if they feel that available ones are conceptually or methodologically weak. Indeed, there may well be

different frameworks and approaches that are either competing or complementary, just like there are different views and ways to measure economic performance or social stratification.

The biggest strategic problem (and fallacy in the past) has been the assumption that civil society tools should please all equally. It is high time to bring this assumption out in the open. What is more, there is a need to acknowledge that it seems best to have each epistemological community (academics, policymakers, practitioners) remain true to its own calling (and hence – strength) and develop appropriate tools and indicators – while keeping bridges in mind. For example, civil society-led tools tend to have a certain 'airborne' quality to them and typically lack the theoretical grounding and methodological rigor of academic approaches; policymaker-led tools, unsurprisingly, have a short-term policy focus, often combined with a 'donor' perspective that may lack deeper reflection and longer term vision; academic tools can be overly abstract, may lack applicability and practical relevance. Each should acknowledge their respective 'professional deformation', and take it as strength, but build bridges to compensate for weaknesses.

The biggest strategic problem (and fallacy in the past) has been the assumption that civil society tools should please all equally.

This does not mean that 'hybrid' approaches, let's say between academia and civil society groups, are to be discouraged. To the contrary, some of the most versatile measures (i.e., the CIVICUS CSI and the World Bank's ARVIN[7]) have indeed benefitted from 'joint parenthood' in both development and application. Moreover, some of the more abstract ones, such as the Johns Hopkins University Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, have a 'single parent' and are hence less strategic and have less relevance for practitioners – even though the index is important for comparative nonprofit sector research. Indeed, the proposal below is explicitly built on the premise that a hybrid approach is the most

promising in terms of strategic potential for policymakers and civil society stakeholder.

A proposal

I propose a dual approach: building a civil society database as a platform for forecasting and foresight approaches. While the former will be spearheaded by academics, the latter will have policymakers and civil society activists actively participating. Specifically:

- First, we need to move from mapping and reporting towards forecasting. This is not to say that we should neglect the former; rather, the 'frontier' of civil society tools development is at the forecasting and foresight, also in view of making them more relevant to both civil society and policymakers. A forecasting approach would also help bring tensions out in the open for debate. Because forecasting (the more technical, quantitative) and foresight (the more qualitative, interpretative approach) allow actors to specify agendas, set objectives and explore alternatives, and hence invite reflection and debate among stakeholders, differences in views and expectations are more likely to come up as part of the exercise.
- Second, to make forecasting possible we need to develop a system that integrates the two most advanced, theoretically grounded, and widely tested participatory approaches and their tools: the CIVICUS CSI and the World Bank's ARVIN. Whereas the CIVICUS CSI has been applied in over 50 countries, ARVIN is less widely used and has been limited in its applications to transition economies (e.g., Albania) and developing countries (e.g., Senegal, Mongolia). However, ARVIN has benefitted from in-depth theoretical discussion among World Bank experts and academics from 2005 to 2007.

In the balance of this paper, I will make a case for this dual approach.

Forecasting and foresight

There is a need to make the various civil society tools and the reports that are based on them more forward-looking and relevant to current, emerging issues. Rather than help policymakers and stakeholders in civil society understand what has already taken place, and why (which is and should be a primary concern of academics), it is increasingly vital to focus on what might happen next, especially in the medium term. In other words, while statistical reporting, focus groups and 'listening posts' projects are indeed highly useful (and to be maintained and improved), it nonetheless seems time to take the next step and offer civil society stakeholders and policymakers what is common for business and governments: namely, forecasting. Specifically, we need to invest in civil society tools that anticipate emerging issues and options, and emphasize their implications for the three epistemological communities (academics, policymakers, and practitioners).

At the same time we should not disregard factors that made the CIVICUS CSI and ARVIN to some extent fall short of expectations. In my estimation, ARVIN did not get the backing it needed at the World Bank and was not disseminated properly. The CIVICUS CSI in turn was too soon declared ready and did not get the academic vetting it needed.

How would forecasting and foresight approaches solve some of the big methodological issues that civil society assessments grapple with (e.g., not reaching out to all actors and therefore looking at only certain aspects or types of civil society actors)? It would do so in large measure by involving and inviting diverse groups as well as different opinions and perspectives.

The basic purpose of such tools would be to issue regular forecasts, annually or at more or less fixed intervals of two to five years. They are set against the statistical mapping of major contours of civil society; capture past and current trends; anticipate and explore future changes and emerging issues; make predictions on aspects of economic variables such as supply and demand as

they affect civil society, revenues and expenditures, employment, and volunteers; social participation and related social indicators; identify enabling and constraining drivers of change; foresee likely scenarios and options; and envision policy developments and the implications.

Such a project would help civil society stakeholders generally and civil society leaders in particular to plan more effectively for the future, and become pro-active in bringing about desired outcomes. Note that participants are not limited to NGOs or any other specific set of actors. It is the responsibility of those designing the forecast or foresight project to make sure that the necessary diversity of voices and representatives is included. A project of this kind that is dominated or captured by some type of actors, be they NGOs or international civil servants, may not result in the kinds of strategic, forward-looking insights that are being needed and sought. Often, for participatory approaches in particular, the process of developing a forecast is as valuable as the forecast itself. It gives leaders a sense of self-determination, ownership and enhanced stewardship.

> *It seems time to take the next step and offer civil society stakeholders and policymakers what is common for business and governments: namely, forecasting.*

All too often in the past, civil society organizations have been at the 'receiving end' of government policy at national and international level – usually with little advance warning. A greater emphasis on forecasting would help reverse this stance and improve the ability of civil society stakeholders and leaders to understand and cope with the changes affecting them. It would offer timelier and more systematic information on current and future trends affecting civil society as well as allude to more promising policy responses. It presents a more systematic basis for public policy toward civil society by alerting policymakers to the consequences of their actions. It would also offer information on what other civil society leaders and experts are thinking, and what they plan to do in

the near to medium term future, rather than on what they have done in the past twelve months or three years.

Fortunately, the field of forecasting has developed much over the last two decades, and we can mine a rich repertoire of forecasting approaches and techniques.[8] Some of these are highly quantitative and demand longer time series and numerous observation points for making predictions. Others are more qualitative, even speculative, and involve structured expert consultations and dialogue rather than statistical estimation. Still others combine both quantitative and qualitative aspects and use both approaches in a symbiotic way.

Forecasts and foresights are only as good as the range and quality of data informing them. There are four major kinds of data systems of interest:

1. Demographic, economic, environmental, social and other context data reporting on the economy, society and polity of the country or region in question.
2. Data about significant institutions and organizations that have a bearing on civil society or relevant policy fields: government activities and finance (international, national, local), other public agencies, the role of major business corporations, the media.
3. Population surveys and other sources that track people's values, attitudes and opinions generally and in relation to specific aspects of civil society such as civic engagement, including volunteering, giving, community relations, forms of institutional, personal and communal trust and confidence.
4. Data on nonprofit organizations and NGOs, including foundations and other forms of philanthropy.

Sorting through the full range of available and potentially useable and 'mineable' data and data sources is a major task for any forecasting. During their initial developmental phase, forecasting projects explore a range of options to select the best 'methodological package', given available data and resources. Undoubtedly, the quality and sophistication of forecasts improves as participants gain more experience and as the data situation improves.

Forecasting and foresight approaches would solve some of |the big methodological issues that civil society assessments grapple with by involving and inviting diverse groups as well as different opinions and perspectives.

Thus I propose the development of a data platform for the purposes of forecasting that is comprehensive, grounded in conceptual understanding, organized around a limited number of core themes and flexible to take account of the specificities as well as complexities at national and international levels. Depending on the focus of the forecast, the data platform is best developed by an experienced team of researchers and policy analysts familiar with civil society statistics and data systems nationally as well as internationally.

The CIVICUS CSI and ARVIN

Civil society forecasting and foresight requires a systematic scan of the empirical contours and facets of civil society. This scan will become the primary input to forecasting itself. Fortunately, a range of such tools has been developed in recent years. While most focus on the nonprofit sector or some of its component parts, others are more comprehensive and therefore more in line with what is required for purposes of the forecast.

Among the various attempts to operationalize and measure civil society, the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) and ARVIN tool have been applied in the largest number of settings and countries. They are also the most grounded conceptually as well as theoretically. ARVIN has received most theoretical attention as a civic engagement and social accountability diagnostic, and is now integrated conceptually into both an institutional approach to development as well as civil society and non-profit

theories (see Anheier, 2006) – yet it is less widely tested. The CSI has benefited from a wider range of applications across different settings and countries, but while the revised version is methodologically improved, it needs a better and deeper grounding in economics and the social sciences.

While both are somewhat similar in their approach and highlight similar dimensions, ARVIN emphasizes civic engagement and social accountability in a policy context. By contrast, the CSI is more impact-oriented and also somewhat more comprehensive in the topics covered. Indeed, the CSI is designed with the objective of a civil society information system in mind, complete with tools for describing and analysing the empirical contours of civil society in a systematic way. In turn, this allows for the assessment of civil society by providing indications of strengths and weaknesses with a view to suggesting policy options. Yet the CSI is missing a way to make its results more action-oriented and strategically relevant – which is what a shift towards forecasting could achieve.

> *Being locally focused or concentrated on specific domains does not mean that the comparative perspective and lessons need to be disregarded.*

The ultimate aim of the CSI process is to enable a structured dialogue about civil society. Similarly, ARVIN is trying to assess civic engagement and accountability via and through civil society. In both cases, this includes raising awareness about civil society across different stakeholders; assisting civil society leaders and representatives in developing a vision and policy position; and improving governance and standards of transparency and accountability throughout. However, to help achieve these objectives, both CSI and ARVIN require a specific purpose and focus, which forecasting and foresight approaches provide. Rather than asking: What is the state of civil society today? we pose questions such as: Where do we want to be in two, three or five years from now? What is our vision? What are our

objectives? What trends, drivers, stakeholders are involved? What are the options available to us?

An enabling environment for civil society, civic engagement and social accountability is understood as a set of interrelationships between the external and internal conditions on the one hand, and enabling elements on the other. These interrelationships shape the capacity of civil society to engage in policies, strategies, programmes and projects to achieve improved public governance, social cohesion, and economic growth. The proposed forecast or foresight framework is meant to bring these issues to the forefront.

In terms of methodology, developed in the context of a forecasting-foresight framework, both CSI and ARVIN are highly participatory, and involve a stakeholder mapping, an assessment of the regulatory framework and policies, a variety of data collection approaches including surveys, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, workshops, and other modes of stakeholder consultations, analysing quantitative data on civil society, and a dissemination and public advocacy component. What is more, CSI and ARVIN can be applied at different levels of aggregation (international, national, local), and for specific fields (health care, environment) and issues (environment, community relations, poverty).

This approach can and should begin by being led by local actors. That said, being locally focused or concentrated on specific domains does not mean that the comparative perspective and lessons need to be disregarded. Rather, it means that the policy implications are targeted to locally relevant stakeholders. The comparability potential of the proposed technique will require further analysis.

Conclusion

I propose to develop, operationalize and implement an approach that combines the relevant features of CSI and ARVIN to selected countries and regions and develop them as forecasting and foresight approaches (see Anheier/Katz, 2009). Tentatively called the Civil Society Monitor (or CSM), this tool is proposed to achieve a basic statistical and policy mapping of civil society.

Most forecasts involve several tools and approaches, qualitative as well as quantitative; it seems premature to privilege any method at present. Initial work is needed to fathom the feasibility, effectiveness and efficiency of each in terms of input (including cost considerations) and output (ultimately: insights generated and user import). Specifically, steps for the short-term for an exploratory or text phase are:

- The geographic scope of the forecast: what countries or communities are to be included in a test phase?
- For quantitative approaches, we need to conduct a full scan of available data, their coverage and periodicity to get a better sense of what forecasting techniques are feasible and at what frequency and cost;
- For qualitative approaches, we need to assess and prepare the key topics, issues, events and drivers that are likely to affect the nonprofits and philanthropy in the near, medium and long-term futures, and develop a plan of how such approaches would work in specific contexts;
- In terms of participation, we need to identify the primary and secondary stakeholders as well as the experts that would be involved; and
- For dissemination purposes, we need to specify primary and secondary audiences at the national and international level, and how best to reach them. In addition, we need to ensure that the dissemination process also provides feedback on the methodology for the next report.

Collaboration will be a key element of this project, as its success ultimately depends on the input received and the acceptance and use of the output produced. In this respect, we will explore cooperation with, and participation of

- Forecasting and scenario planning experts
- Non-profit, civil society and philanthropy experts
- Non-profit leaders across all major fields
- Foundation leaders, philanthropists
- Government officials and budget experts
- Community leaders

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[1] United Nations (2003). *Handbook on Non-Profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts.*

[2] See http://unstats.un.org/unsd/nationalaccount/

[3] See www.wupperinst.org/uploads/tx_wibeitrag/ws42.pdf

[4] At www.un.org/en/civilsociety/index.shtml

[5] At http://ec.europa.eu/civil_society/index_en.htm

[6] At http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/CSO/0,,pagePK:220469~theSitePK:228717,00.html

[7] The ARVIN framework is a tool developed by the World Bank to assess the enabling environment for civic engagement. It is based on five critical dimensions: Association (the freedom of people to associate), Resources (their ability to mobilize resources to fulfill the objectives of their organizations), Voice (their ability to formulate and express opinion), Information (their access to information, necessary for their ability to exercise voice, engage in negotiation and gain access to resources) and Negotiation (the existence of spaces and rules of engagement for negotiation, participation and public debate). See http://go.worldbank.org/378AB9OH00

[8] Put simply, forecasting is, "concerned with approaches to determining what the future holds" (www.forecastingprinciples.com). As such, it can be applied to a number of problems and questions related to planning, policy, and economic and social issues generally. In essence, forecasting methods and techniques enable researchers to build models, often referred to as scenarios, for estimating and exploring different futures and the developments and patterns they entail. Models typically explore the future course of a present social condition, issue or problem relative to particular interventions. For example, forecasting is widely used in the field of demography to examine different population projections[8]. Models use past growth trends and patterns to predict the future growth of the general population or specific sub-groups as result of government policy (e.g., migration), practices (birth control) or economic developments. Note that given an array of alternative developments, one option is simply to take no action concerning a present social condition, issue or problem – a wait and see attitude that forecasters call 'the harms of inaction.' Forecasting is very common in the business world. Economic forecasting is a well developed field and several business schools have their own version of an economic forecasting model.

IV

WHAT ARE FUTURE POSSIBILITIES TO ASSESS CIVIL SOCIETY? DRAWING FROM THE ARAB EXPERIENCE

Amani Kandil

The growing concern of UNDP with participatory self-assessment of civil society organizations at the global level represents qualitative progress. This is because it not only highlights the importance of civil society, but opens the path for a debate about civil society as well as a critical review of literature and methodologies (essentially Western) that are not always compatible with social, cultural and political contexts of other cultures.

Background

As a backdrop it is important to note that at the onset of the 21st century it became increasingly evident that different activities aimed at strengthening Arab civil society, and stimulating its role in addressing the challenges of development and democratic change, fell short of expectations. In this regard it was important to call into question the efficacy of 'Western' theories and approaches and evaluate potential alternative approaches. For about a decade now, many Arab practitioners and scholars, the author included, have been focusing on how the limited progress in activating civil society on issues of development and democratic reform can be explained, as well as how this can be addressed.

This question invariably leads to various sub-questions including: how can we evaluate the impact of civil society organizations? On which indicators can we rely? How could this be achieved considering the absence of systematically recorded data, lack of transparency in bookkeeping (budget and financial allocations), and limited flow of information that is the reality in the Arab world and many developing countries in general? What role is played by social culture and prevailing norms? What was the impact of long years of authoritarian powers on both organizations and activists of civil society? [1]

Existing literature as well as academic and practical experiences point to the following:

- Civil society does not refer to a **homogeneous entity** as it shows high discrepancies in terms of size, human and material resources, organizational structure, field of activities and values in each country or community. Most importantly, these divergences are fundamental when it comes to the levels of effectiveness as well as the factors that stimulated this effectiveness (e.g., a strong leadership backed by human and material resources or, alternatively, external support and access to financial resources).

- Civil society is mainly a **social and cultural phenomenon** reflecting organized voluntary initiatives conducted at a specific historical moment, influenced by a socio-cultural context that itself aims at impacting in turn. Organizations shaped by the socio-cultural context in a country or community hold specific features based upon various factors such as: urban or rural, distance from the centre, the customs related to women's participation, religion and its impact on philanthropic activities, etc.

- Civil society is furthermore the **result of a series of interactions** between socio-economic factors and political regimes in developing countries in general and in the Arab region in particular. Authoritarian regimes perceive civil society as the 'opponent'. Civil society in turn does not trust the State. Current legislation governing civil society supports this thesis. Moreover, policies aiming to respect global standards and requirements are often mere smokescreens, while security services continue cracking down on civil society in general, especially human rights

organizations. In short, the popular and official political discourse that speaks of civil society as a partner is not to be always taken seriously. Thus, the support of the State goes to service delivery and philanthropic organizations filling a gap in its public policies.

In general, the political culture of citizens resulting from the interaction between the political regime and society in the Arab world is fundamentally different to the political culture of the West. In this regard it is inadequate to borrow the ideas of Western societies about liberalism and democracy, rotation of power, and dialogue and tolerance towards different opinions for an analysis of civil society and society at large.

> *It is inadequate to borrow the ideas of Western societies about liberalism and democracy, rotation of power, and dialogue and tolerance towards different opinions as regards the analysis of civil society and society at large.*

Moreover, the current state of political and economic forces in the Arab region and developing countries in an era of liberalizing economies and expansion of global markets is also shaping the features of civil society.[2] Over the past ten years many organizations in the Arab world (some with a great deal of influence) have become free market advocates and proponents of privatization processes, thereby questioning the very idea and concept of public benefit.

A critical review

These arguments underscore the importance of a critical review of the actual state of civil society. This review needs to accurately reflect interest groups as well as alliances between the political and economic powers. The question here is: Do the criteria characterizing the concept of civil society need to be revised and readapted in many societies around the world?[3]

Among the main criteria that need to be critically reviewed, the following are of particular importance:

- **Public benefit**: Essentially whatever is understood by 'public benefit' is defined by the government; therefore, the government reserves for itself the right by law to suspend the work of organizations it considers working *against* public benefit.
- **Non-politicization:** This criterion is particularly difficult to define, due to the virtual absence of strong political parties in many countries in the Arab world.
- **Faith-based:** The role and influence of these organizations is critical as many faith-based organizations provide their services only to those who adopt the same religion.
- **Independence and self-management:** The notion of CSOs working independently of government is a fallacy as most Arab legislation concerning civil society organizations gives governments the right to intervene in their decision-making processes.

It is worth noting the environment surrounding the birth of western civil society organizations, which have been shaping theory and analysis over a long period of time. These organizations developed in close interaction with the capitalist market as well as with the concept and practices of liberalism and democracy. This historical evolution shaped the role of CSOs in Western countries, their relationship with society on the one hand and with the State on the other, as well as the distinctive boundaries between civil society and interest groups. Western writing about the third sector has focused on the role of civil society in the process of adaptation and adjustment with the continuously renewed changes. The literature is equally focused on the role of civil society in achieving stability and equilibrium between the various interests and needs.

The two aspects mentioned above are mainly based on the concepts of freedoms, democratic practices, tolerance, dialogue and convergence between the various stakeholders, in a context of political diversity and acceptance of accountability and transparency. In other words, we refer to a civil society relying on a civic culture that developed together with CSOs in a specific historical context, thus creating the main divergences between Western countries and developing countries witnessing renewed types of authoritarianism.

This leads to the question of the role of a civil society lacking a civic culture. To what extent can CSOs in this case represent the mechanisms of political and socio-economic change? While this question is beyond the scope of this paper, it does serve to underline the different historical backgrounds of CSOs in the Arab region where the roots of volunteering and giving can be found in Islam (donations and almsgiving).

Since the second Hegira century, Sufi orders based on charity, volunteering and worship were established. Moreover, the Islamic and Christian endowments developed considerably in Arab history, extending the field of charity to health, education and social care. These individual and collective voluntary initiatives lasted until 1821 when the first voluntary organization was created in Egypt, followed by the establishment of associations in various Arab countries that today amount to around 360,000 officially registered non-profit NGOs.

This historical background is characterized by the will to protect a national identity contrasting with Western colonialism, the presence of religious missionaries, the growing authority of foreign minorities, and the degrading political and social conditions in the Arab region. Therefore, the development and growth of Arab NGOs is affected constantly by socio-economic and political variables and dynamics. Socio-cultural history has influenced (and is still influencing) the features of Arab civil society, where the vast majority of organizations are charity-oriented with a religious reference, service or providing social care. On the other hand, the percentage of developmental and advocacy organizations is much lower although the current decade has witnessed an unprecedented growth in their number as a result of global changes and the complicated economic situation of the region.

Civil society self-assessments empower civil society in a realistic rather than an abstract context.

In conclusion, CSOs are the natural outcome of a given socio-cultural history as well as the result of interactions between a political and economic regime and the society as a whole in a given moment.

Necessary conditions for a participatory civil society self-assessment

UNDP interest in civil society self-assessments shows a conscious shift in approach and empowers civil society in a realistic rather than an abstract context. Most other donor-driven processes are largely external by definition. Participatory self-assessments are the right tool for a number of reasons. While drawing on specific values, they can be implemented in all communities and socio-cultural contexts. They also reflect a genuine awareness about the importance of assessment on the part of CSOs. Two important considerations are: the proposed methodology should be simple without imposing an external assessment that might be interpreted as threatening and provoke sensitivities or conflicts; and its cost should be quite limited.

Participatory self-assessments also foster democratic governance in the following ways:

- Strengthening participation of the local community and other partners involved in planning and implementation of the organization's programmes.
- Encouraging dialogue and self-criticism in a way that might lead to consensus between different points of view.

- Influencing the democratic practices in civil society organizations because they give space to all partners to participate in programmes and internal decision-making.
- Leading an organization to question its strategic thinking depending on discussions and dialogue between different partners working and volunteering in the organizations.

The above points notwithstanding, the implementation of these approaches should be linked to a specific socio-cultural and organizational context; in this context, the team of workers and volunteers together with the local community are the most capable of understanding and identifying the practical difficulties, either in designing or implementing the programme or the project. The methodology of participatory self-assessment could become a sustainable process to be regularly repeated to review the organization's strategic planning and make necessary interventions in a timely manner.

The field research conducted over the past ten years (mostly by the Arab Network for NGOs) indicates the low percentage of Arab civil organizations making use of self-assessments (less than five per cent of the sample used in the study of the indicators of effectiveness in 2010). The vast majority under the percentage mentioned above practice these assessments because their grant contracts include a clause about assessment led by donors. In parallel, a high percentage of the organizations considered the discussions of the board or the reports presented to the general assembly as an assessment. Thus, there is obviously a need to raise the awareness of these organizations about the added value of assessments.

Additionally, assessments become a process of collective learning and a tool of capacity building for civil society at the level of both organizational structures and staff (either workers or volunteers). In this case, an assessment is also linked to the provision of strategic planning skills, enabling organizations to adopt the appropriate interventions to redress the trajectory and achieve the desired objectives.

Western approaches and methodologies, including the CIVICUS Civil Society Index, in the process of assessment and capacity development rely on assumptions regarding the basic requirements of a strong civil society. It is important to evaluate these requirements to see if they are appropriate for civil society in the Arab region.

What are the key requirements for the success of assessment in general and for the specific socio-cultural context in particular? Firstly, these types of assessments would need to rely on a high level of awareness and knowledge about the importance of assessments. As stated above, this occurs only to a very limited extent in the Arab world. Ultimately this should lead to an appreciation of the value of collective work that bases itself on the existence of a healthy social and cultural environment, based on mutual trust, opportunities of dialogue and acceptance of differences.

Other important general requirements at the community level include:

- Respect of the values of transparency and accountability including at the level of governance, legal rules and actual practice of roles.
- Free flow of information and sharing of knowledge.
- Respect of the value and practice of inclusion and rejection of exclusion even with the presence of contradictory opinions.
- Availability of a reasonable democratic space, enabling participatory self-assessment, and contributing to a healthy climate inside the organization and to its relations with other stakeholders.

Regarding the assessments themselves, it is of crucial importance that the stakeholders are familiar with the dimensions and steps of the proposed methodology, and that it includes as an integral component the participation of local communities and beneficiaries. Lastly, strategic planning about priorities for local communities is key, with a focus on one or more issues according to the social environment.

These requirements, that can be summarized as the existence of a 'healthy democratic environment' creating opportunities for successful assessment, may be only partially in place or totally absent in some cases. This underlines the need to intensify efforts in the field of comprehensive and sustained capacity development at the various national levels in the targeted countries.

Drawbacks and pitfalls of civil society self-assessments

Having confirmed the importance of participatory self-assessments as having several advantages and being compatible with the conditions of each country and local communities in line with socio-economic and cultural indicators, it is necessary to also point out their main weaknesses to formulate a future vision and recommendations.

Participatory self-assessments rely heavily on certain aspects of a 'healthy' cultural environment. They include values such as collective work, mutual trust, and self-criticism, which are present to varying degrees in many Arab countries. Furthermore, participatory assessments of civil society rely on interaction and communication inside the group in addition to sharing information and knowledge as well as the practice of full transparency. In the case of absence or weakness of these elements, positive results are difficult to achieve.

Another aspect of weakness of this approach drawn from empirical observation of its application in the Arab context is the inherent bias that emphasizes the importance of certain factors of the social, cultural and political environment. That is, the 'negative' results of assessments can often be derived from an exaggerated emphasis on restrictions within the legal framework, difficulties in fund-raising, or weak responsiveness of the targeted categories in the local community. In addition, there is usually a big gap between the objectives of the programme/project of the organization and the actual outcomes, resulting

from the formulation of overly broad objectives incompatible with available capacities. The Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) begins by training the team working with CSOs on strategic planning before implementing participatory self-assessments.

In the cases where organizations have not adopted a clear methodology in designing their structure or type of governance, with distribution of roles and responsibilities, the desired outcomes from the process of participatory self-assessment are very limited and self-analysis becomes difficult.

Finally, the type of governance, the level of internal democracy, the acceptance of participation and contradictory opinions are obviously reflected in the implementation of participatory self-assessments. Here, discrepancies emerge not only between one country and another or among various communities, but between organizations existing at the same place and time.

'Negative' results of assessments can be derived from an exaggerated emphasis on restrictions within the legal framework, difficulties in fund raising, or weak responsiveness of the targeted categories in the local community.

Despite factors that diminish the impact and positive influence of participatory self-assessments, a strong reason for their adoption and dissemination is the inherent process of collective learning, training the team (workers, volunteers, and target categories in the local community) to critically and objectively reflect, to work together to improve performance and impact, and consequently to develop a culture of civil society.

Conclusions, main suggestions and recommendations

To conclude, the following recommendations and suggestions are put forth regarding some of the aspects raised in the paper.

With respect to the concepts of capacity development being integral to self-assessments, it is important to revise the relationship between the socio-economic, political and cultural context on the one hand and civil society organizations on the other hand. Therefore, the philosophy of capacity development and its approved mechanisms might be suitable for one given society but not for others, and may or may not succeed in a specific country or region. When capacity development relies on a main component such as training, long-distance learning, or the use of communication technology, the process might be successful in some countries or organizations but fail in other settings. Therefore, it is important to adopt a wide concept of capacity development that can be defined as a series of internal and external organized interventions aiming at enhancing the effectiveness of the organization as a whole, and positively impacting its human, material and technical capacities as well as its relation with the society and other stakeholders to achieve effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability.

The processes of capacity development need to be:

- Comprehensive regarding all aspects of organizational behaviour (strategic planning, team work, good governance, etc);
- Complementary and integrating all aspects of capacity building (research, training, flow of information and knowledge);
- Sustainable over time;
- Targeting specific needs highlighted by involved stakeholders;
- Flexible enough to address the socio-economic and political context.

Accordingly, capacity development involves various interacting and complementary elements, i.e., training, scientific research and sharing of knowledge, interaction, communication and networking (between the various stakeholders), use of information technology to improve civil society's effectiveness, publication and dissemination of accessible information compatible with prevailing educational and cultural levels, workshops and conferences, and adoption of the concept of assessment and its methodology in all the dimensions and components of capacity development.

It should also be noted that cross-national comparison is feasible; however, it should be subject to scientific and objective regulations. [4] It should be focused on enabling comparative findings about human and material resources, culturally specific strengths and weaknesses of projects adopted by civil society, the impact of the type of governance, inclusion and participation, in addition to the relationship between activities and the local, environmental, socio-cultural and political needs.

Therefore some specific recommendations about participatory self-assessment based on all the above remarks will help us to overcome the weaknesses of this approach, one that nonetheless represents an important asset requiring stimulation:

- Participatory self-assessment should encourage national initiatives geared towards capacities to develop guidebooks about participatory self-assessment, either for advertising the concept or in the form of training kits.
- Creating a link between participatory self-assessments and other methodologies aiming at strengthening capacity is crucial. This includes building on the skills of strategic planning, participatory forms of governance, networking, information and knowledge about civil society with a special emphasis on the culture of dialogue, collective learning, acceptance of contradictory ideas, and on the adoption of the culture of transparency and accountability.
- To successfully and effectively implement this methodology, there is a need for training of trainers in each country to form small groups disseminating this culture on a wider scale.

In sum, participatory self-assessments of civil society can become an important tool for collective learning and capacity development, particularly in the Arab world. This paper has argued that the very process of implementing self-assessments can provide a learning opportunity for all stakeholders involved, fostering a sense of inter-sectoral trust and shaping a values-based approach. However, it is important to take into account the culturally specific conditions in the methodology and implementation approach and re-examine the assumptions on which many 'Western'-led assessments were built. When this is done, assessments can also prove to be powerful strategic instruments to plan and coordinate development interventions between actors.

[1] The attempt to answer these questions encouraged the author to work in two directions (2007-2011). On the one hand, the challenge at hand prompted a critical review of the Western theories, concepts and methodologies about civil society as well as a re-reading of the Arab literature in order to identify the interaction between the political, economic, social and cultural contexts. On the other hand it led to an attempt to develop a programme of assessments that includes several components: research and studies about the state of evaluating civil society at the regional level using field tools such as questionnaires, personal interviews, and focus group discussions, as well as using both quantitative and qualitative indicators. The second component of the programme provided several types of training including the participatory self-assessment based on a guidebook compatible with both workers and volunteers (in terms of educational and cultural background, human and material capacity). Following this phase, additional steps were taken to identify the indicators of civil society organizations' effectiveness through a cross-national comparative approach (in 2010) to achieve in 2011 the fourth component of this programme, i.e. a guidebook of Arab civil society organizations' self-assessment based on four clusters of indicators enabling any organization to identify its rating in terms of effectiveness, strengths and weaknesses.

[2] Amani Kandil (forthcoming). *Mapping of the Arab Civil Society in 2010: Which role does it play?*

[3] In this debate it is also important to take into account the politicization of some organizations in sectarian and religious communities of many Arab countries that often stand in stark contrast to western criteria of what is considered the 'good' civil society.

[4] This is confirmed by the Arab NGO Network for Development initiative of implementing the methodology of participatory self-assessment over a year in eight Arab countries.

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