

**Civil Societies North-South Relations:
NGOs and Dependency**



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Working Paper 1, November 2005



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Bernardo Sorj¹

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Introduction: Civil Society: the next steps²

“Civil society” is supported by such disparate groups as big corporations, the European, Japanese and USA governments, the World Bank, the Social Global Forum as well as right and left wing political parties around the world. For some it is a catch- word without precise meaning, while for others a new concept which illuminates the path to a better world. Whatever its precise meaning, and as we will see it is far from precise, one cannot dismiss the fact that “civil society” is in the center of current sociological and political science debates on democracy and democratization processes and has become the symbol of solidarity and social change in the post-cold war global public debate. As such, due to its evocative power in expressing the hopes of a better world it has a strong influence in organizing the perception of citizens as well as enhancing the importance of the various actors claiming to be part of civil society. Besides this evocative power there is a fundamental political issue: are civil societies capable of effectively expressing, organizing and advancing the demands of citizens? Can they fulfill the role of intermediary spaces between individuals and social groups and the political power structures, in a context in which political parties are increasingly devalued?

The concept of civil society cannot be simply set aside using the argument that it doesn't fulfill the basic standards of scientific social theory as demonstrated by the increasing criticism of social scientists on the limited usefulness of the concept.³ A critical approach in addition to scrutinizing its scientific explanatory relevance, needs to: 1) understand why the concept has become so important, 2) explain why and how it has been appropriated by so many different actors, and 3) analyze the role and position of the different actors who claim to be part of or representative of civil society and their role in the making of the contemporary political system.

This paper claims that the current theoretical debate has arrived at a cul-de-sac and the actors of civil societies themselves, in particular independent NGOs in developing countries, have begun to realize that they are confronting a crisis of growth and increasing criticisms from the outside, in particular regarding their lack of transparency, relative ineffectiveness and representation deficit. At the same time from the inside there is frustration with the dependency on external donors and the overall poor results of most of their actions, expressed in the dissonance between what it is expected of civil society to produce and what it actually delivers, or between their high capacity for raising issues and their low capacity to change entrenched inequalities in society and the appropriation of the state by private interests.⁴

² In this work we return to and develop the arguments I have advanced in Sorj 2003 and 2004. I am grateful to Joel Edelstein, Bila Sorj and John Wilkinson for their fruitful comments on an earlier version of this paper and the discussions with Miguel Darcy and the members of the “Working Group on Global Governance” of the Instituto Fernando Henrique Cardoso and of several NGOs with whom I discussed the arguments of this paper. It goes without saying that the responsibilities for any mistakes are only mine.

³ For critical analysis on the concept of civil society see David Chandler (2005), Adam Seligman (1992) and Neera Chandhoke (2003).

⁴ See, for instance, the Conference on Civil Society, Governance and Integration in Africa <http://www.pambazuka.org/index.php?id=29034>

This is especially true in developing countries where the expectations for the new democratic regimes were strongly related to the role of civil society in consolidating the democratization of social life. As an example of this dissonance, in Latin America, the number of NGOs after democratization grew exponentially (in Brazil alone there are half a million non-profit entities)⁵ while social inequality and political instability continue to feed the growing support for populist leaders who appeal directly to the poor, using symbolic and material cooptation, weakening democratic institutions. Although NGOs have become an important employment niche, thus becoming self-centered and oriented toward their own reproduction, their future lies in their capacity to continue to be legitimate social actors.

In this paper we argue that civil society's most vocal expression in developing countries, independent NGOs, although sharing some common elements with their counter-parts in advanced countries are **dependent NGOs**. The concept of dependency was elaborated mainly by Latin American social scientists to characterize as developing countries those whose economic structures lack the capability to produce locally technological innovation.⁶ By extension we define dependent civil society organizations as those whose main source of financing and political-social agendas come from advanced countries. This, as we shall see, does not mean that it is impossible to increase their space of autonomy and creativity. In fact, quite to the contrary, the practical aim of this paper is to contribute toward renewal and to increase the political role of civil societies in developing countries both in national and global affairs.

To achieve this aim civil societies will need to advance beyond the current political and ideological discourse within which they are trapped, that of being by definition essentially do-gooders against the evils of the state, politicians and civil servants. This only delegitimizes the democratic regime. In developing countries the poor people know better than the ideologists of civil society, that private solidarity will not solve their needs for an efficient legal and public security system, education, health, sewage, electricity, water and urban services. Civil society will only be an important democratizing factor if it becomes actively involved in the political system and the transformation of state institutions and political parties.

To advance the debate on the concept and the role of actors claiming to be part of civil society, social scientists need to engage in conceptual and empirical research, avoiding theories based principally on wishful thinking and moral claims that substitute the complexities of the real world with well intentioned rhetoric regarding the value of civil society or of denunciations of the practical limitations of its activities. It is not that moral orientations do not inform social analysis, on the contrary, but the XXth century has taught us that if we want to be faithful to our values we need to mistrust social processes, and understand that cooptation, deformation and unforeseen consequences are the rule in social life, that intentions are only a starting point, and that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions" both for individuals and organizations. Exercising critical thinking can be seen as a negativist exercise and sometimes indeed it is. Without the optimism and pragmatism of will, reason only produces linear deterministic

5 According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – IBGE (2004) in 2002 there were 500.157 non-profit entities, of which 45.161 were devoted to "development and rights defense", the majority of which were created after 1990.

⁶ In the parlance of that period, developing countries were mainly producers of raw materials and final goods, but were dependent on importing capital goods.

analyses that may tend toward paralysis and lead to defeatism. We need to do our best to overcome both naïve optimism and negative criticism, although they are unavoidable dangers in the art of understanding social reality.

We are conscious that classificatory systems and social concepts - be it, for instance, the working class, religion, peasantry, enterprise, democracy- are precarious and can't be completely separated from their common sense meanings nor can they be defined in such a clear way that their contours and content allow a clean cut isolation of the phenomena in society. Social realities are plastic, changing and full of noise, and defining what is the working class, religion, peasantry or democracy, always implies a good measure of discretion by the social scientist. The best one can hope for is that the definition will be as clear and inclusive as possible, acknowledging the complexities and the lack of clear boundaries within social realities.

It can be argued that we are confronting a proto-reality, a new social phenomena in its making and therefore unable at this moment to be easily grasped and conceptualized. However with the concept of civil society these problems are magnified by the fact that its various definitions (almost each author on the subject has his/her own) include the most varied sets of actors and the concept is generally loosely related to wider theoretical frames of social theories on contemporary society, in particular, the functioning of the political system. However, social proto-realities cannot be an alibi for intellectual confusion.

Our analysis is informed by the fact that our perspective on civil societies is that of a person living in Latin America. As a sociologist I have experienced for decades the tendency of our countries to be colonized by well- minded theories and theoreticians from advanced countries who, in spite of their best declared intentions, disregard the different local, social and political realities and the invisible relations of forces in the production of knowledge and practice supported by the north/south and national divides. But the main reason behind assuming a contextualized perspective is that political theory is not disembodied from the societies in which it is produced and the uncritical importation of concepts from different contexts can be, as we will see, wasteful of human and material resources if not plainly harmful.

An historical and socially contextualized concept

As the bibliography on the subject has extensively explored,⁷ the contemporary revival of the notion of civil society is related to the opposition movements to communism in Eastern Europe and to military dictatorships in Latin America.⁸ What was the civil society in these contexts? In the Polish case, for instance, the main actors were a trade union (Solidarity) and the Catholic church, both strongly interrelated, while in Brazil they were trade unions, professional associations (in particular lawyers and scientists), sectors of the church, entrepreneurs and “alternative” (as well as mainstream) privately owned press supported by the allowed opposition party.

⁷ See, inter alia, John Ehrenberg, 1999, Adam Seligman, 1992, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, 1992.

⁸ As well as in Cuba and China nowadays.

Most of these actors wouldn't be included in current country reports being produced by research centers on civil society, although in most of developing countries, religious organizations are the main source of voluntary associations, solidarity and philanthropic work, while privately- owned journals would be automatically excluded as being part of the market or profit- oriented sector and trade unions might be mentioned or not, but placed in limbo due to most civil society theoreticians' diagnoses which throw them into the waste bin of history.

Furthermore, the meaning and main actors of civil society today, in Poland and Brazil, are quite different from that of the period of struggle against authoritarian states. In fact civil society is an historically changing concept, it's origins are related to the work of social philosophers in the XVIII and XIX century trying to define the sources of social solidarity in a world where society, religion and the state, were split in separate sub-systems and individuals had become autonomous and oriented by self-centered values and aims in a market economy.⁹ In the context in which the state, for most authors (with the important exception of Hegel)¹⁰ was to be reduced to a minimum program of assuring law and order, the source of solidarity was sought in some characteristic in human nature or transcendental dimension that would counteract the egoistic tendencies produced by the market orientation. Civil society for most authors of the XVIII and XIX century was comprised of all the forms of association present in society, including those related to the market, with the exclusion of the state.

It is important to recall that most of these theories were produced much before the explosion of the industrial revolution and the rise of social democracy. In the XX century the old civil society theories became obsolete by a double transformation in social theory and society. Social theory, which began to take shape in the second half of XIX century, abandoned the idea of a human nature or transcendental force as the basis for understanding social behavior. The source of solidarity, trust and social integration was to be explained in terms of social processes linked to the structures of societies and its institutions (for instance, division of labor, socialization, shared values, shared interests, ideological domination). More importantly, from the second half of the XIX century onwards, new realities like the workers' movements, trade union and socialist political parties created a new vector of solidarity in which the state itself became both the main target and actor in the making of social welfare policies. This new vector of social transformation was symbiotically associated to the national state, itself interested in consolidating national unity and preempting social conflict. Therefore, the questions posed by early liberalism found new answers in the increasing complexity of political structures through the transformation and democratization of the state.¹¹

The importance of labor social movements during most of the XX century obfuscated the continued importance of other forms of associations and institutions of solidarity – the family, local communities, friendship, religion, ethnicity, diasporas- and the various

9 See, inter alia, Simone Chamber and Will Kymlicka (2002), Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani, 2003, Neera Chandhoke (2004), Adam Seligman (1992) and Nancy Rosenblum, Robert C. Post (2002).

10 For whom only the state could reintroduce a universalistic ethos beyond individual or group interests. On Hegel's theory of civil society and the role of the state to overcome the particularistic orientation of civil society, see Shlomo Avineri (1972).

¹¹ On the process of the irradiation of the workers' movement struggles on the whole of society and the creation of the welfare state see Bernardo Sorj (2004).

forms in which these associations and institutions were differently absorbed by each national political tradition. As we know, for instance, in the United States voluntary participation in local associations had a major role in the maintenance of civic values while in France the republican tradition stressed the state as consubstantiating the values of freedom, solidarity and fraternity and centralized state institutions regulated (generally weakening) most of the intermediary social institutions. In fact each European democratic country offered variations of the ways in which the different organizations of social solidarity (including trade unions and labor-based socialist parties), were integrated in the creation of democratic societies, not to mention the different realities of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes of the XX century.

Transferring the aura of XVIII and XIX century theories to current phenomena doesn't solve the problem of the contemporary meaning of civil societies in which the state plays a central role as provider of public social goods, where social conflict is politically and legally channeled and access to government is organized through the confrontation of political parties' in periodic elections. In this new context civil societies' role has deeply changed, and each national civil society is related to the specific formation of its local socio-political structures, constitution of identities and forms of trust and solidarity.¹²

Instead of searching for one universal model of civil society we need to recognize that there are a variety of civil societies. The historical roots of state formation, the national political traditions and the ways that social conflict is organized, all these components will define the specific place and meaning of civil society in different national contexts. A concept of civil society detached from the different social and historical context needs to be, as we will see, minimalist. Only after a systematic effort of identifying the different meaning of civil society in contemporary societies, one can develop typologies of civil societies related to their different socio-political contexts and try to find out what are the common threads between them.

Civil society's current "prestige" as well as its polysemic use is the product of a strange convergence of different political traditions and social actors

After a century of latency civil society has become a fashionable concept, principally due to the struggle against authoritarian military regimes in Latin America and totalitarian communist regimes in Eastern Europe. In those contexts it represented the highly heterogeneous universe of actors who shared the common aim of fighting to democratize these political regimes. In so doing, with the end of communism and (re)democratization of Latin American countries, civil society was in principle doomed to be a short lived phenomena. But instead it has become a central concept in the political life of developing and developed societies. What happened?

Civil society's new central role in capitalist democratic societies began to rise both with the criticism of the welfare state from the right and the crisis of the left produced by the fall of communism and the crisis of socialist utopia. The criticism from the right came

¹² See for instance Adam Seligman (1992) reflections on the impact on civil society of the particular ways of formation of communal identities in eastern Europe and Israel .

as an attack on the increasing expansion of the state and its costs, on the welfare policies that were argued to increase the incentive to stay out of work and the rise of single-parent families, diminishing entrepreneurship and individual autonomy. The concept of civil society, which this type of thinking supported was a return to solidarity-based civil associations (be it the family, local organizations, the church or philanthropy). While in the British tradition this was a return to classical liberal thinking in the United States it was theorized as a return to Toquevillean democracy based on a myriad of local associations as the main source of civic values and participation.¹³ This trend of thought became entangled with communitarianism and with the much publicized but problematic concepts of social capital and trust, generally linked to a diversity of political orientations.

On the left, the discovery of civil society was related to the abandoning of hope in the working class and socialism as well as increasing criticisms to the welfare state as a form of bureaucratization and invasion of creative social life.¹⁴ Civil society from this perspective was a way to struggle against the oppressive tendencies both of the market and the state, creating a space of autonomy and free communication.

These two very different ideals of civil society were conflated in everyday life and media, and in fact, in spite of their different origins, have some real convergences. Both are a symptom, and an attempt at a solution to the current crisis of representation in contemporary democracies, where political parties tend towards the center and the political programs both of right and left wing offer minor differences losing their appeal to mobilize and their capacity to produce new visions of society.

As the Washington Consensus reforms didn't produce the expected results through structural reforms delivering economic growth and modernization of the state and new ideas were needed to transform social institutions, civil society matched the demand for a malleable concept, with non-direct involvement in local politics, being supported both from the right and the left. The consensus around civil society as an actor capable of short-circuiting the state institutions (considered to be a source of corruption and inefficiency) made of it the right idea for appropriation by international institutions (the World Bank, the United Nations system, even the FMI). For the United Nations system NGOs are an ally in their struggle to organize a transnational agenda that bypasses national states' monopoly on decision-making based on the principle of sovereignty.

Thus civil society is related to very different ideologies and international actors. Does this mean that we have different civil society organizations, each with a clearly defined ideology? Not at all, many civil society organizations themselves and the majority of citizens do not clearly identify with a given view of civil society. The ideologies and theories of civil societies are only relevant to the extent that they capture the attention of the major political and economic powers on the direction that these societies should take. The effective reality of civil society cannot be reduced to the influence and wishes of ideologists or social thinkers. Its practical dynamics do not fit either the desire of

¹³ See Peter Berger and John Neuhaus (1996) for a pioneer work on this kind of thought.

¹⁴ On the last point Jürgen Habermas (1989) had a central importance in advancing a left wing criticism of the tendency of the welfare state to colonize social life. See also Pierre Rosenvallon (1984, 1995) and Anthony Giddens (2000).

right wing thinkers of civic associations to diminish the role of the state, or the model from the left of a radical space separated from the market and the state.

Understanding and defining the role and function of civil society is part of the contemporary struggle for the reorganization of the political system both nationally and internationally. Civil society becomes a privileged common field through which different actors negotiate and advance different interpretations of social reality. However it is not a neutral concept as it is embedded with strong connotations of mistrust in relation to traditional political institutions.

Views on Civil Society

At the center of the civil society debate is the fundamental problem of the social sciences: by which processes capitalist democratic societies, in spite of their natural tendency to create possessive individuals,¹⁵ produce institutions that aim toward altruistic behavior, in which people are ready to invest their personal resources and even their life, in advancing freedom and solidarity. The point is not so much why there is altruistic behavior, an issue still in the philosophical (or, for others, biological sciences) realm, but rather what are the specific characteristics of solidarity-oriented institutions and their (effective) capacity and limitations to change society.

Insofar as civil society is an institution of modern democratic capitalist societies, an explanation of what it is and how it works should be related to the overall social-political and cultural context. As we have previously indicated, in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes civil society refers to those groups or individuals who fight to open the political system in order to create an effective public space and the promoting of free associations of citizenship. The issue nowadays is to understand the role of civil societies in contemporary democratic regimes.

Before advancing in the direction of characterizing contemporary civil society in democratic countries we will discuss briefly the main theories of civil society.¹⁶

a) Civil society as an autonomous actor - Much of the bibliography on civil society, especially that coming from the left, emphasizes not only the autonomy of civil society from the market and the state, but also its different logic, one in which individuals communicate freely, giving voice to the excluded, without the barriers of economic and political power. Does this ideal of civil society have any relation to what goes on in reality?

Consider this: the Global Social Forum's (which designates itself as the radical expression of civil society) main venue has been the city of Porto Alegre.¹⁷ The

¹⁵ On the concept of possessive individualism see C. B. Mcpherson (1962).

¹⁶ We have tried to separate different types of arguments although most authors use more than one, and in some cases, like Michael Edwards (2004), explicitly assume an eclectic definition of civil society as an aggregate of various dimensions. For a useful annotated bibliography on Civil Society and NGOs see Devora Seade, 2000.

speakers in the Forum who attracted the most participants were President Lula in 2003 (who said that in Davos he will represent the voice of civil society!), and in 2005 President Chavez, two politicians. Most of the participants at the Fora were from middle-class origin, and outside participants came mostly from NGOs with paid tickets. Those NGOs were comprised of professional staff and their leaders who are not elected by the members of the NGOs themselves. Although its stands are open to diverse expressions and organizations, the structure of the Fora round-tables and the choice of speakers are decided by a small committee without any wider mandate. Porto Alegre 2005 Forum's main financial resources came from the Brazilian federal, state and local government and Petrobras (an enterprise criticized by some Brazilian NGOs for disrespecting the environment). What is even more paradoxical is that one of the most applauded countries in the Fora has been Cuba, whose government systematically denies a role for civil society in the UN meetings and, in addition, the Brazilian Landless Movement -while being an extremely centralized organization defending an old model of socialist ideology also assumes a place of honor.

In fact, civil society organizations may be viewed as part of a continuum between the state and the market, rather than as a radical alternative to them. Not only do they exist because of the legal conditions assured by the state, but also the state and private enterprise resources are generally their main source of financing. The ideal democratic environment of free and autonomous communication has little resemblance to the real world of civil society organizations (be it NGOs or church associations) where internal democracy is in most cases non-existent (most of the medium and large NGOs leadership are not elected, bureaucratic rules govern their functioning). This doesn't negate NGOs importance, only that of the theoretical frames that derive social realities from abstract elaborations. Neither the market, the state nor civil society operate with just one rationality, as shown, for example, by the importance of trust in commercial relations, of values in political parties and of economic and bureaucratic power in civil society organizations. If most radical social theorists of civil society would confront their definitions of civil society with actual reality they would realize that they are not describing a proto-phenomena but rather imagining an actor that is to a great extent simply a functional substitute for the previously idealized working class.

A main feature of contemporary societies, to which we will return later, is the increased melting of frontiers between social subsystems (judiciary, economy, politics and science) rather than their increased autonomy. The image of an independent civil society was related to situations of confrontation with authoritarian regimes, in which civil society was seen as an autonomous actor confronting the state. In contemporary democratic states there are no walls protecting the boundaries of civil society.

Therefore the real challenge that NGOs nowadays face and increasingly debate worldwide is how to negotiate their degree of autonomy in their relations with their financial supporters (the state, international agencies, foundations and enterprises). This involves their increasing bureaucratization due to the need to adjust to external demands

¹⁷ At the time of the first Forum the municipality of the city was under the control of the Workers Party. Porto Alegre is known for being the birthplace of the "participatory budget", generally presented as an example of a civil society achievement (see Leonardo Avritzer 2002). In practice the participatory budget reality is much more complex, an extremely expensive exercise, open to the manipulation of local activists and dependent on budget implementation, which is defined by the ad hoc political realities of the government.

of donors and the unequal power relations between NGOs from the North and the South. Instead of ignoring current tendencies the challenge is to redefine the relation of civil society to the state, the political system and the market.

b) Agents of the good society - Civil society in the media has become synonymous with anyone that by definition struggles for the good society.¹⁸ This approach is based on a naïve Manichean view that social institutions can have an a priori moral nature, and that it can be taken for granted what the good society is, or, more precisely, who has the power to define what is good. In this view we will need to recognize as good any definition produced by any civil society actor, and they have numerous definitions of the good society, many of them contradictory.

The most damaging political consequence of defining civil society as a monolith oriented by the same basic (good) values is that it denies its intrinsic pluralist and diversified composition and confers moral authority to anyone who defines himself as part of civil society. Furthermore it implies that good values constitute a coherent package of values. However, the history of the XX century is witness to the conflicting tendencies between solidarity and freedom. In the name of solidarity people were ready to kill those outside their group while in the name of freedom solidarity was put aside. Some social processes, like individualism, put freedom first, while others (for instance, religion and nationalism) solidarity.¹⁹

The definition of civil society as composed of non-violent actors,²⁰ which would exclude civil society groups such as the Klu Klux Klan, Hamas or the IRA, is also problematic in spite of the personal dislike of most for violence. As an extreme example, under this definition armed anti-nazis groups in the Second World War would be excluded from civil society. Even from a normative perspective, it would be difficult to exclude violence a priori as an instrument of self-defense and struggle against oppression.

d) Pillars of democracy - Strengthening civil societies as the path to consolidate democracy has become part of the credo of international agencies.²¹ Although strong civil societies are common in strong democracies, there is no direct link between civil societies and the democratization of the state.²² Civil societies do not produce naturally or automatically civic values. Civil societies have a dialectic relationship with the state, rather than being their opposite or opponent. The more societies mistrust the state institutions the more civil society will tend to be alienated and its actions will even erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions. On the contrary, the stronger the identification with the state's main institutions the more civic civil society organizations will become, to a point where the separation between civil society and the state's basic institutions will be almost effaced.

Only under a democratic state civic oriented civil societies flourish, but civil societies can also beget undemocratic groups. This is particularly true in the context of weak or corrupt states. They may produce a reaction from society which can support the likes of

¹⁸ Many authors advance this view. See in particular Michael Edwards (2004),

¹⁹ See Norberto Bobbio (1982) on the antinomies of values.

²⁰ The market as a constitutive part of civil society is defended by John Kehane (2003).

²¹ See, for instance, www.worldbank.org/civilsociety/

²² See Ariel C. Armony (2004).

the ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, Hamas in Palestine, or other similar civil society organizations in the Islamic world. The bibliography has increasingly emphasized the phenomena of uncivil societies (including criminal gangs, terrorist and violent political groups), that is groups that do not accept the civic values of non-violent confrontation in the public space. However, to a lesser extent according to each case, there are also religious organizations in democratic states with agendas that limit civil liberties. While in the first case these groups are the expression of a wider issue, the consolidation of alienated civil societies in social contexts in which there is a general mistrust in the basic institutions of the state, in the second case they express a diversity of phenomena: the increasing role of Christian fundamentalists in the United States and of fundamentalist Islamic minorities in Europe who reject the secular tradition.²³ In such contexts, many civil society organizations tend to amplify the mistrust in democracy. In other words, associativism doesn't automatically produce nor is it necessarily related to civic or democratic values.

e) Third Sector Associations - The definition of civil society as the Third Sector,²⁴ that is, as organizations which are not profit-oriented, seems in principle more useful, especially because it lacks strong normative connotations, but it excludes informal groups and individuals who engage in civic or public activities. Perhaps the most important revolution in the information society was the result of the initiative of one individual, Linus Torvalds who, with the support of an informal network, launched Linux, the main platform of the free software movement. The importance of international pop stars in influencing international agendas sometimes seems to be more relevant than that of NGOs. Informal gatherings (without formal association status) that are so important in the developing countries, like the market place or bars, in which much of the public debate and initiative take shape are also excluded from the formal definition of the Third Sector.

The major limitation of the Third Sector concept is that it presupposes isomorphism between itself and the first (State) and second (market) sectors. While those two have a high level of formalization and stability (although in developing countries most of the private enterprises have a high degree of informality) civil society is multiform. This is even more so with the new means of communications, which allow for the constant formation/transformation/disappearance of ad hoc informal groups. One of the main characteristics of civil society is its creativity in expanding the limits and forms of participation in the public space making it much more plastic and nebulous than the market or the state.

Towards a sociological delimitation of Civil Society

²³ On the issue of civil society and different religious traditions see Nancy Rosenblum and Robert Post (2002).

²⁴ The most important research centre using the Third Sector conceptual framework is the John Hopkins University, Institute for Civil Society Studies, in particular see the work of his director Lester L. Salamon in <http://www.jhu.edu/~ccss/staff.html>

The bibliography presents a mixed use of the concept of civil society, which is seen as representing either an arena or a set of actors. As an arena, the bibliography does not produce any argument to substitute the much consolidated concept of *public space* for that of civil society. The public space is not an actor, it is the possibility for the constitution of actors, and it includes everyone who, based on the rights of freedom of expression and association engages, without external imposition, in value-oriented debates and activities that affect the perception (and/or reality) that the members of society have of themselves (from a local community to the global). The shape of the public space and its actors depends on the actors themselves, their capacity for creating new forms of expression, association and institutions. Public space is an historically evolving institution, increasingly including new actors (at the beginning it was mainly restricted to members of the elite; it took long periods of social struggles to include the working classes and women). Also its shape has constantly changed, from small intellectual clubs to political parties and trade unions to the current tendency toward decreased face-to-face participation and the increased use of electronic means of communication.

The public space includes all actors that engage in the public debate, including state officers and members of government. State institutions are both the main guarantor of the existence of the public space and one of its most important actors. As a public sphere actor government doesn't (or should not) mobilize its discretionary power, being just one more participant in the construction of social consensus.

The public space is about free communication and organization. But communication and organization in a capitalist democratic society depend on the capacity to mobilize resources (human and material) capable of influencing the perception that society has of itself. The idea of a public space where people communicate and organize free from material resources and individual interests is an idealistic view advanced by such diverse thinkers as Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas.²⁵ We should not underestimate the reality of power in the public sphere in order to avoid an excessive concentration of power by any actor (be it corporations, state organizations, religious groups or, for that matter, NGOs).

Civil society in democratic regimes is therefore not an arena but a set of *actors* in the public sphere who claim to be part of civil society. There is no *a priori* definition, outside the political and cultural struggle of who should be defined as part of or excluded from civil society. As such, defining civil society is itself part of the political confrontation, appropriating and imposing one's own meaning on the concept. The only actor that can be plausibly excluded from a working definition of civil society is the state, because it commands the resources and legal power delegated by citizens, allowing it to retreat from the public debate and impose its decisions on the whole of society. Any individual citizen and informal or formal group (from church organization and sports clubs to trade unions) that engage in the public sphere is a potential civil society actor.

²⁵ See for instance the work by Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato (1992) heavily informed by Habermas theory: "But the actors of political and economic society are directly involved with state power and economic production, which they seek to control and manage. They cannot afford to subordinate strategic and instrumental criteria to the patterns of normative integration and open-ended communication characteristic of civil society": ix. In later publications Arato (1995) has nuanced his argument.

The issue of whether one should exclude private enterprises or political parties from civil society is an operational problem, not a matter of principle. Any private enterprise that presents itself in the public realm with a given message (for instance, “we create jobs” or “free enterprise produces economic growth”) is part of the civil society. By the same token there is no theoretical justification for disqualifying political parties as a central civil society actor in search of the public good. At best in some cases they can be excluded in order to delimit the actors who are not directly involved in or seek to become part of the government. But this should not exclude (the issue of) political parties and congressman interaction with other actors of civil society, which is, as we will see, central for the understanding of contemporary democracy and its challenges. Finally the media have an ambiguous but central place in understanding the dynamics of civil society. They are normally private enterprises but are the most important voice through which civil society can express itself, becoming its main mirror, but a distorted one by the private interests they represent.

The importance of maintaining an open definition of civil society is that otherwise one is subjected to a normative discussion of who should or should not be included. Only by keeping open the concept of civil society to anyone who claims to be part of it can a non-partisan analysis of its changing meaning and the different ways that it is appropriated by different social actors be made.

The analysis of societies should not be based on a priori definitions but on the understanding of the social contexts and ways social actors search to advance their own different definitions of who comprises civil society and what its role is. *Civil societies are not a given predetermined phenomena; they are what social actors make of them.*²⁶ By doing so, they participate in the shaping of citizens’ perceptions of the political system, highlighting some options and downplaying others. However, the analysis should not be reduced to only understanding the symbolic confrontations but should also include the human, organizational, political and economic resources that the struggle for meaning mobilizes.

NGOs are the main novelty of contemporary Civil Societies

Beyond the wide operational definition of civil society as including each individual or group of individuals acting to influence the public sphere we need to identify the specific new aspects of civil society in contemporary global and national politics. Contemporary discussion on civil society is related to its role in advancing citizen representation, the construction of collective values in the making of the political system and the ways by which citizens can influence the destiny of society through participation in the public sphere as opposed to the traditional forms of political representation.

As we mentioned earlier, the rise of the civil society idea in the last decades is related to the crisis of the socialist secular utopia and its main vectors, trade unions and political parties on the one hand and the advance of neo-liberalism on the other. The

²⁶ See Ariel C. Armony’s (2004) excellent book on the inexistence of a necessary “...positive and universal link between civil society and democracy...”, 2004.

disenchantment with the state as the main agent for changing society, coupled with the central role of the media in the making of public opinion and political campaigns, increasing individualism, social fragmentation and the rise of the discourse of human rights and group identities, was the ground on which from the 1970's onward NGOs began to expand exponentially. But the growth of this *new political form* by which solidarity expresses itself nowadays wouldn't have been possible without an important amount of resources from European international cooperation, the United Nation system and national states, and, in advanced countries, voluntary contributions, funneled to finance these new organizations.

What are the NGOs? Civil society associations (cultural and sports clubs, professional and scientific organizations, Masonic groups, philanthropic institutions, churches, trade unions, diasporic groups, community associations, to mention only some) existed throughout the XXth century. While the above mentioned organizations directly represent or are expected to be representative of the public whose interests they advance, contemporary NGOs claim legitimacy based on the moral strength of their argument. Therefore, *what is new in contemporary civil societies are the NGOs, organizations that advance social causes without aiming to receive a mandate from the people that they claim to represent.*

Traditional philanthropic organizations, which also do not represent their public, never claimed to be the voice of their clientele, and the church's hierarchical power is based on the belief that they have a mandate from heaven, being the representative of God on earth. Revolutionary parties, like the Communist party, saw themselves as the vanguard to which the working class would finally identify and adhere. The precursors of contemporary NGOs, like the Red Cross or Action Aid and Oxfam (the last two later changed their orientations) although motivated by strong moral humanitarian values, did not intend, at their origin, to take a politically partisan position nor to represent the views of the people they attended, but only to improve their lives.

NGOs are therefore a real revolution in the realm of political representation. As with many social phenomena they have their precursors: in this case in the organizations and people who struggled against slavery or, later, for women's suffrage and for consumer rights. But during the XXth century the representation of public causes and the debate in the public space was mostly channeled through the trade unions and political parties.

This new phenomena of representation without delegation, or perhaps more fittingly, self-delegation without representation, is related to the above mentioned social processes which channeled the creative energies of social activists into new forms of organizations detached from or without clear and permanent links to the public they claim to defend. This is obviously more so in relation to the NGOs in developed countries that support developing countries social groups and causes.

Not being based on the direct support of the community they claim to represent, NGOs are dependent on external resources for their existence. Differently from most of the traditional civil society organizations, which were based mainly on voluntary work, the NGOs are run by professional staff, hence, they become an important employment niche. Finally, their lack of a stable and homogeneous social base from which they can exert political pressure, induces NGOs to advance their agendas through ad hoc social mobilizations with media-reaching objectives.

This characterization of NGOs is much narrower than the existing universe of NGOs as legally defined. Many legally defined NGOs fit the traditional civil society associations' model of organizations, representing a given membership (from trade unions, to professional organizations and community based NGOs). The novelty of the development of the new phenomenon of NGOs in the last decades is the creation of a political actor without a direct mandate from their target constituency. The new NGOs are not only a new type of actor but they have changed the landscape of traditional representative NGOs, especially the smaller community based ones. While previously, in developing countries, community-based NGOs interacted mainly with government from whom they asked the delivery of goods, now community based-NGOs increasingly follow the model of the new NGOs of searching for outside nongovernmental funding. This is done directly or indirectly through linking themselves to major national and international NGOs. In the process they become increasingly professionalized and carry the social projects themselves.

NGOs are a developing story not a fixed reality. As any social phenomena contemporary NGOs don't have fixed characteristics. Their organizational forms, ideologies and political role are in constant mutation and in the last decades they have undergone, as we will see below, important changes. The world of NGOs is an increasingly complex galaxy which is growing exponentially *in numbers and in issues* (to mention but a few: ecology, gender, human rights, human security, children, animal rights, development, consumption, humanitarian aide, information society, regional integration, education, HIV, arms control, health, rural and urban development, drugs, social research, education, trade, corruption, international finances, the elderly, each of them with their own sub-division); *origin* (created by individuals or independent groups, communities, business, religious, , ethnic and gender groups, diasporas and political parties among others), *levels of activity* (local, national and international), *type of staff* (voluntary or professional, although most NGOs include both); *type of financing* (voluntary subscriptions, government and international agencies, private foundations, although most NGOs have a variety of funding sources), *size* (small, medium and large), *ideologies* (the greater the number of NGOs and issues they address the more diverse the views they represent on national and international problems), *location* (country, region), *type of activity* (advocacy, social projects).

The variety in origin, financing, issues, ideologies and geographical location, allows one to produce a large diversity of typologies of NGOS. None of them however, from a sociological perspective, is *a priori* more relevant than any other. Typologies depend on the researcher's focus, questions and approaches. Studies on the world of NGOs is a growing field developing a variety of analytical approaches; some emphasize internal organizational issues while others focus on their ideological tendencies, and on their impact on society.²⁷ Still the field is plagued by normative overtones, influenced by the rhetoric of the NGOs themselves.

Last but not least there is the issue of sources of financing. While some of the major NGOs in developed countries receive an important part of their financing from voluntary contributions, public/private foundations and international institutions, external financial support is central for most NGOs, in particular in developing

²⁷ On the different research centers' approaches see Dayse Marie Oliveira, 2005.

countries. In the hands of these institutions as well as those of large foundations (mostly American) and official European cooperation, NGOs have become a *civil society proxy* and the *delivery tool* for their policies of international cooperation. This financing always has, implicitly or explicitly, strings attached. The world of NGOs can only be understood as part of a larger chain in which donors have a central role. Directly or indirectly donors are a major player in the making of NGOs agendas. Although NGOs have some capacity to influence their policies their fight for survival pushes them to adapt to donors' agendas. As we will see this is more dramatic in developing countries where voluntary donations are generally not relevant and external resources are decisive. In the case of international cooperation there is an additional issue, that of the enormous amount of money that individual countries and the European Union spend on their own "experts" as well as the requirements they create to purchase products produced from their own countries.²⁸

There isn't a homogenous and predefined political role for NGOs

NGOs are embedded in their local political reality. The role of NGOs in democratic regimes is immersed in and dependent on the level of democratization of the society and its political system. The lesser the democratic characteristics of a society the greater are the chances of NGOs becoming detached from the political system, thus becoming alienated from the national institutions, which can lead them to play a role in weakening the construction of a democratic state.

Civil societies can't be dissociated from the social and political structures within which they flourish. The role and political influence of NGOs in a particular society, as we already have pointed out with respect to "civil society," depend on the societal context (in extreme cases they may have vanished or been repressed as in fundamentalist Muslim countries or dictatorial regimes, like Syria, Iran, China, and Cuba). In other regions (as shown in general terms in the following examples) civil society has quite a diversity of roles according to different social realities.²⁹

In many African countries NGOs rather than being one expression of civil society they are its main component and they act as an interface between international donors and local society. For many critics they have a similar function to that of missionaries from the western world and therefore are alienated from the actual issues and problems of the construction of a democratic state. According to one author: "Thus, the challenge for civil society in Africa is to strengthen the democratic state by collaborating with its government structures at various levels, by assisting in restoring the social contract between the state and its citizens and by pressing for necessary reforms which turn the vision of effective civil society-state co-governance at the community level into reality (Mbogori et al. 1999: 120)." "To conclude, civil society stakeholders have to recognize that "strengthening civil society requires as an indispensable condition the strengthening

²⁸ See Romilly Greenhill, Patrick Watt et al., (2005).

²⁹ There are innumerable descriptive reports and some solid academic analysis on national civil societies and NGOs. See for instance, the countries reports in the IDS site: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/civsoc/> and the annotated bibliography in Deborah Eade (2000). Some interesting cases studies can be also found in Robert W. Hefner (1998), Sara E., Mendelson, John K. Glenn, (2002) and Sudipta Kaviraj) and Sunil Khilnani, 2003. On India see Rajesh Tandon and Ranjita Mohanty, 2000.

of the state: the state and civil society stand or fall together!” (Marcussen 1996: 421 in Kumi Naidoo and Volkhart Finn Heinrich, 2000: 12).

In many parts of Africa, NGOs, when they are allowed to function, absorb a significant portion of middle class professionals subtracting actual or potential cadres from government. Due to their almost complete dependency on foreign resources local NGOs’ agendas need to adapt to foreign donor priorities and so-called international NGOs’ agendas, acting many times as sub-contracted services. Supported virtually in their entirety through external funding, they offer “international” salaries, meaning a much higher salary than those earned by public officials. This enables their members to preserve a degree of autonomy and a critical distance from the widespread corruption in public administration. NGO budgets are expanding—a significant portion of international cooperation funding currently is allocated directly to “civil society”—thereby transforming these organizations into genuine power centers with enough clout to question the legitimacy of established governments in international forums

The universe of NGOs in Latin America has become tremendously diversified since the late 1960’s when it was funded mainly through external sources and it’s main goal was to participate in the resistance against authoritarian regimes. In Latin America, NGOs generally have less political weight than in Africa, although their voices reverberate in the media. In the poorer Andean countries NGOs play an important role in supporting local indigenous movements.

In recent decades, the relative importance of European funding to Latin American NGOs has declined (increasingly concentrated in Africa and Eastern Europe) while public funding sources are on the rise, as well as support from the business sector, which, influenced by the *socially responsible company discourse*, has significantly increased its involvement in social projects in countries like Brazil (Anna Peliano, 2005). Governments and international agencies turn to NGOs to carry out specific actions, which they make use of to offset dwindling resources and bureaucratic pigheadedness and corruption. Financial support from their national states is considered as a mixed blessing, due to their tendency to delay payments or simply write them off with a change in government. The search for financing from the state and the private sector has increased the identity crisis of NGOs. They are criticized by outside intellectuals as a tool of the state or as the marketing of private firms thus creating a feeling of orphanhood within NGOs.

The Latin American situation is an example of a world of NGOs which only partially reflects the dynamic of the national civil society. To some extent it reflects the disposition of foreign donors to support independent NGOs, in the beginning with relatively limited monitoring. Foreign support has now diminished (and, in any case, it couldn’t match the increasing growth of the sector) and most of the new sources of financing are less generous, increasingly monitored and linked to very specific areas, not always those preferred by the NGOs themselves.³⁰ Still, local NGOs have proven themselves, in some countries, as in Brazil, to possess a great capacity for the mobilization of public resources and private firms in social projects, and a remarkable creativity, advancing applied research and engaging state institutions in some areas, like the struggle against urban violence³¹ and, in particular, in establishing one the best

³⁰ On case studies of NGOs in different Latin American countries see the site www.alop.or.cr

³¹ See for, instance, the case-study of Viva Rio in Bernardo Sorj (1993).

worldwide programs against AIDS. In Argentina equally they had a central role in keeping the memory of the of the people killed during the military dictatorship.

The Arab world is a clear example of the limits of creating an independent civil society with civic values in a context where sociability and NGOs themselves are impregnated with a culture where conflicts are not peacefully resolved and where dominant religious values do not support the idea of institutions autonomous from religious leaders influence. The authoritarian states in the Arab world whose business interests are intermingled with the political system are not supportive of independent NGOs.³²

NGOs in Europe, while playing a major role in advancing solidarity causes and utopian values as well as being an important source of employment do not have much importance as carriers of social policies. In some countries, such as France, for instance, NGOs subcontract with the state and/or lay the groundwork for the entry of public services in “difficult” neighborhoods. Many of the mainstream NGOs in Europe focus primarily on international cooperation, while others have an important role in addressing issues such as environment, women’s and minority rights and undocumented workers. In Germany a social movement typical of civil societies, the ecology movement was successful in transforming itself into a relatively important political party, although in other European countries it was less successful (although the Greens did participate for some years in the Belgium government). Transforming a social movement based on one issue into a political party has proved a difficult task, not only in obtaining wider support but also because of the strains it creates between the social movement’s “purist” attitudes and the need for compromises related to the realities of power.

In the United States, the country that is considered the model for civic associativism, there have been important changes as Theda Skocpol shows in her excellent book (2003). Skocpol argues that the main issue in the contemporary U.S. is not a decrease in civic association but rather changes in the ways in which it is organized and functions and it’s social and moral density. In the classical period North American civic associativism was constituted by cross-class voluntary local organizations³³ which were linked to Washington through federative structures. Its activities were not oriented towards a reduction of state expansion, on the contrary, many civil society demands were to expand state welfare policies. Contemporary civic associations are either self-help endeavors (Weightwatchers being the civil society association with the biggest constituency) or comprised of persons from the same social group (mostly privileged) with low levels of interaction, managed by specialists in lobbying and fund raising campaigns.

The new civil society voice is therefore no more the expression of local bottom-up associations but of specialized advocacy staff. The new advocacy groups are highly professionalized and an important employment niche, with activities flowing from the top to the bottom and strongly commercially-minded. Participation has become almost

³² See Ben Néfisa, Sarah, Abd al-Fattah, Nabil, Hanafi, Sari, Milani, Carlos, 2004.

³³ Theda Skocpol’s main blind spot is that she includes trade unions as part of the traditional US multi-class civic association model while they are constituted by only one social group. Therefore she doesn’t isolate in her analysis the specific impact of the decline of trade unions in the United States on wealth distribution.

reduced to letter-sending, through which organizations advocate their causes and supporters send their donations. These changes reflect the transformation of the U.S. social structure, the new role of educated women (previously a main pillar of voluntary work) in the workforce, the decline of the trade union movement, the increasing importance of foundations and of the new communications and media in politics and in particular of new forms of upper middle classes, sociability which isolate them from the rest of society.³⁴

The so-called Global Civil Society reproduces the North/South divide

Modernity from its onset was a transnational cultural phenomenon. The main ideologies of modernity; liberalism, nationalism, socialism and fascism, were the product of the constant intermingling of thinkers and practitioners from all continents. Through the circulation of books and traveling elites (in particular of colonial intellectuals studying in European universities) the modern world system of nation-states' societies was shaped by the wave of ideologies which originated in Europe and which was assimilated and adapted to local conditions. Traveling to the great European metropolis was a must for the dominant classes of the periphery who on their return organized in their own countries political clubs, Free Masons lodges, Positivist temples and nationalist parties.

At the end of the XIX and beginning of the XXth century, the great migrations from Europe transferred both people and ideas, spreading trade-union and socialist parties, while the mass media (press and radio) converged in the creation of trans-national public opinion. In the last decades, cable television and the Internet have increased the quantity and quality of information circulating worldwide making it available almost instantaneously.

The creation of contemporary world public opinion movements, as expressed in the civil war in Spain, the fight against Nazism, colonialism, and peace movements and in favor or against communism was a consolidated process by the second half of the XXth century. In the last decades trans-national public opinion has changed not only due to new communication systems but principally as an expression of major ideological, political and social transformations. The decline of political parties as the main vehicle for forming and mobilizing public opinion, the end of the capitalist/communist divide, the decline of inclusive ideologies, the increase in the individualization process and social fragmentation as well as new collective identities, have increased the importance of mass media in shaping public opinion. Public opinion has become more moody and reactive to issues rather than oriented by long term and clearly defined political goals, and easily changes according to the latest events and changing perceptions. But transnational public opinion was and continues to be largely dominated by economic, political and cultural powers based primarily in advanced countries. It is far from obvious whether the changes in the dynamics of international relations since the fall of communism have increased the relative influence of developing countries' public opinion (and governments) in the international sphere.

³⁴ On the US see also the interesting book by Christopher Beem (1999).

While there is undoubtedly something that can be called *transnational public opinion* it is confusing to speak of a global public opinion. To become meaningful and more than just a metaphor such a concept would need to encompass the existence of an effective space for all national public opinions to express themselves, hence a new type of world citizenship uprooted from national interests. Considering that the citizens of many countries do have no means to make their voices heard even locally, the notion of a global public opinion refers mainly to the confrontation in the world arena of a still limited number of citizens and elites.

The diffusion of ideas from national or regional contexts to the world level continues to be the most important cultural vector of social change. Human rights, free market, feminism and environmentalism, to mention some of the most important ideologies of the contemporary world have shaped trans-national public opinion through a complex process of formation of global agendas (that is agendas for social change that claim to have universal validity). However the infrastructure of intellectual and material resources needed for the formation of global agendas is highly influenced by the South/North divide and needs a careful analysis.

Classical national civil societies (what we have called representative civil society) in the XIXth. and even more in the XXth. century created a large network of transnational organizations. Probably the one most resembles more the ideal global civil society of a free space of autonomous communication is the scientific community (although not completely free from the local reality of each national scientific community due their differing capacity to mobilize financial resources). Political parties and trade unions also created transnational networks, not to mention the different religious groups, which always had the tendency to go beyond national frontiers. In all these cases the differential power between poorer and richer countries, or between center and periphery (in the case of communist parties, Moscow and Peking had a dominant role) didn't allow one to speak of global civil society organizations. However in some cases the logic of some organizations (like scientific or religious institutions) had a set of principles, beliefs and interests that protected them to some extent (at least in democratic countries) from the national spheres of power.

It would be legitimate to speak of some of these organizations (for instance the Catholic Church or the scientific community) as global, in the sense that they have a common transnational set of rules and institutions which although influenced by local conditions are relatively self-contained sub-systems capable of communicating and defending world-views beyond the national societies. These relatively closed institutions not only exist thanks to shared beliefs but also due to the infrastructure and resources that they are capable of mobilizing both nationally and internationally.

However, the idea of a global civil society³⁵ is at best an elusive metaphor which doesn't make much sense empirically and can easily induce one to a mystified view of contemporary politics. As we mentioned before, national civil societies are constituted

³⁵ For an overview on the concept of Global Civil Society and different perspectives, see Gideon Baker and David Chandler (2005) and Mary Kaldor et al, 2004. For a critical analysis of the concept of Global Civil Society see Gordon Laxer, Halperin Sandra (2003) and David Chandler (2005). Several authors present their own idiosyncratic view of what is civil society. See, inter alia, John Keane, 2003, Michael Walzer (2002, and José Vidal Beneyto (2003). For a quantitative analysis see Lester M-. Salamon et al. (2003).

by very heterogeneous actors. There is no internal unity between these actors nor do most of them have an international impact. In fact most theories of global civil society do not refer to a supranational level in which national civil societies express their views but rather to new supranational players advancing global agendas, the international NGOs (known as INGOs)..

Mary Kaldor et al, for instance present a definition of global civil society as "... the sphere of ideas, values, networks and individuals located primarily outside the institutional complexes of family, market, and state, and beyond the confines of national societies, polities, and economies." (Ibid: 4). The authors trying to further clarify their definition indicate that the participants of global civil society and their values are "... at least in part, located in some transnational arena and not bound or limited by nation-states or local societies" (Ibid.) The main problem here is the meaning of the concept of transnational arena, a concept that is not defined by the authors. In fact in the contemporary information society Internet makes transnational any local act and cable TV can transform any local event into a worldwide spectacle.

The fragility of the definition is not improved by the authors adding that "Global civil society is also about the meaning and practice of human equality in an increasingly unjust world... is about finding and giving 'voice' to those affected by the old, new emerging inequities..... it is about private action for public benefit..."(Ibid.) As we have mentioned before, basing a social concept on moral intentions begs the sociological question: who defines who are the makers of the discourse that the authors identify as being typical of civil society. As David Chandler convincingly argues³⁶ the values of global civil society could only be defined by global society itself, which presupposes the existence of free communication of the members of global society, who define what their values are. And such global arena and actors don't exist.

The concept of global civil society is generally based on *methodological cosmopolitanism* (as against *methodological nationalism*) which envisages social processes beyond the frame of the national states.³⁷ According to the cosmopolitan view the old perspective circumscribed social processes within the boundaries of national realities and viewed the state as a natural phenomena and the main actor in the international sphere. This argument is to a great extent based on creating a straw man: sociological analysis has always shown that the historical origin of the national state and it's main theoretical frames were not bounded by national realities. In fact the main mistake was to consider this as a universal process located in given countries or regions. A similar but opposite mistake is made by methodological cosmopolitanism by stating the existence of a **global entity disembedded from local conditions**.

Still, without overrating the importance of non-state actors in the international arena, the criticism made of the realist school of international relations (which focus mainly on national sovereign state interests) is relevant and the increasing role of international actors beyond the national states is an important point. Transnational communities of activists (not only NGOs, but also religious groups, diasporas, scientists) have an important role in the making of international politics although this point should not be

³⁶ See Martin Shaw (2004) and Ulrich Beck (2004).

³⁷ See the articles by Shaw and Beck, for a critique of the constructivist approach see David Chandler (2004, Chapter 7).

restricted to contemporary world politics, since the beginning of modern times they have always been important transnational players.³⁸

Yet it is not that the actors described by the label “global civil society” have no key role in world politics. They do, but the concept supposes the existence of a cosmopolitan actor and a free global arena which don’t find any support in empirical reality. It’s stress on a global perspective overlooks that the national state is still the main locus of wealth distribution and life opportunities for most inhabitants of the planet. Maybe the world should be different but while it does not change in regard to the importance of the national state’s role in wealth distribution the real fight is about improving the relative position of the poorer countries and the poor within each country. Adopting a cosmopolitan view implies that someone (an individual or organization) can be the bearer of a cosmopolitan perspective. Does this mean that beyond the subjective intentions of individuals/group, there are actors who are capable in practice of being uprooted from their national contexts? The concept of global civil society supposes that for the actors of this new arena the national realities of unequal power and cultural bias have disappeared thanks to the shared values of those that integrate this new realm. But the facts speak otherwise. The presumed members of the global civil society nourish their cosmopolitan values from their national cultural realities and they finance their activities with the support of public and private donors of their countries who set the parameters for their action.

The so-called International NGOs, that is organizations who defend causes beyond their national frontiers without a mandate from the people they claim to defend, have a complex genealogy within humanitarian movements and organizations beginning in the XIX century. The anti-slavery movement in the late XVIII century and the Red Cross in the XIX century were followed in the XX century by organizations mainly oriented toward mitigating the effects of war or humanitarian crisis (Save the Children in 1932 and Oxfam in 1942 followed in the aftermath of second world war by Care, Christian Aid, Caritas and World Vision). But it was only in the last decades of the XXth century that the NGOs multiplied and became a partisan player in the struggle to establish globalization agendas.

Most of the humanitarian NGOs, like Oxfam, transformed themselves in this process, becoming involved in international political confrontation on the ways to reduce poverty and support development, while new, mostly secular NGOs (unlike their predecessors) were created in the field of environment, humanitarian aid, human rights and every possible area - to mention some of the most known: Amnesty International (created in 1961), Green Peace, Human Rights Watch, Medecins sans Frontieres, (all of them appearing in 1971).

Contemporary NGOs have become the main vector for the elaboration of global agendas of solidarity. They disseminate new values and denounce inhumane conditions, governments and international agencies activities. The transformation of NGOs into political actors is generally presented in the bibliography through three periods: a first phase of philanthropic orientation until the 1960’s which was followed by one centered on development concerns in the 1970’s and 1980’s and finally, the current one, of

³⁸ Still, it can be argued, as Chandler does, that some of the players do not support alternative agendas to those of their national states, rather their international agendas are supported by national governments as part of their internal self-legitimizing role.

radicalization and denouncement of globalization (tackling mainly the issues of human rights, gender, environment, the role of international finance agencies, trade barriers to agricultural products, patents and multinationals' code of conduct). Of course there are important nuances between the attitude of the different NGOs and this periodization disconsiders the importance of NGOs (and foundations) related to right wing (generally religious but also secular) tendencies. However the common factor is the politization of NGOs and their increasing importance in political and cultural confrontations.

Most international NGOs' national (or multi-national) headquarters are based in developed countries, where they get most of their financial resources and associates. Undoubtedly any NGO is dependent on donors. But the agendas of NGOs based in the North are the expression of their own societies from which they receive their material resources while most "independent" Southern NGOs depend on support from outside their countries. In so being, the world of NGOs is not a network of equals but is based on a hierarchical power structure. NGOs based in the North, even very small ones, have the capacity to act internationally while major Southern NGOs get support mostly to act nationally.³⁹ While most NGOs are located in the South the so-called International NGOs (INGOs) are mainly from the north. ***Hence the paradox that the so-called global civil society is oriented by values of equity but there is no equity in global civil society.***

The idealization of a global civil society leads to a representation of the world as unified by actors with a common view capable of transcending national interests and cultural realities. But the reality is quite different: national or regional interests and culture are a constitutive part of the NGOs. This does not imply the impossibility of alliances and productive cooperation between NGOs from the North and South. But we should not underestimate important disagreements between NGOs from the South and North on concrete issues, be it the governance of the Internet, agricultural subsidies, organizing humanitarian aid, fair trade, or the priority to be given to environmental issues.

NGOs from the North are capable of establishing and disseminating global agendas that are off limits for most of their third world counterparts.⁴⁰ Furthermore NGOs from the North have the resources to establish their local representation in developing countries, contracting some of the best local cadres and sometimes even "buying" local NGOs.

This doesn't mean that we agree with authors, working within Bourdieu's theoretical framework, like Guilhot (2005) and Dezalay (1996, 2003), who argue that NGOs have become the vector through which U.S. foundations and universities co-opt intellectuals and disseminate neo-liberal agendas in the Third World. There is an increasing number of studies which argue that NGOs have become instrumental for neo-liberal policies, compensating for the state retreat from welfare activities, and, in a similar vein, some critics consider the discourse of human rights functional to the liberal view of a minimal state coupled with a deregulated market. Many critics also argue that NGOs are increasingly distancing themselves from grassroots and social movements, becoming an

³⁹ In this sense the world map presented in *The State of Global Civil Society 2003* (Mary Kaldor et. al. 2004), which shows global civil society being mainly based in advanced countries is obviously biased by the north-south relationship: the main criteria for density of global civil society is the existence of International NGOs!. (Helmut Anheier and Hagai Katz, 2004)

⁴⁰ Perhaps one of the few local innovations that has become part of the international agenda is the so-called people's banks, which lend to micro-entrepreneurs and producers.

appendage of international financial organizations and government agencies, weakening the political capacity of popular groups.⁴¹

This perspective represents an over-simplification of reality, although, as we will see, some of the arguments have some grounds, in particular in relation to the NGOs technocratization and distancing from social movements. However, the increasing isolation of NGOs is part of a general social shift, in which the increasing fragility of popular sectors is part of a major structural change in many developing countries –the weakening of trade unions and left-wing political parties and the loss of their utopian horizon. The world of NGOs is not homogeneous but a complex galaxy capable sometimes of producing useful innovations, in particular on the issue of gender which expanded womens' participation in different fields of public life. In general the human rights discourse is a fundamental contribution to society, even if it too often suffers from a strong bias towards denunciation often incapable of establishing a positive agenda.

Furthermore, the identification of structural adjustment policies as the source of all evils affecting Latin American societies is misplaced. Social inequalities on the continent are based on a stable long term tendency and undoubtedly many adjustment policies had negative social impacts but they were supported –at least passively- by most of the population which perceived them as the only available alternative for stopping hyperinflation and diminishing increasingly unacceptable corporatist privileges accumulated by entrepreneurs and sectors of the middle- classes working for government and state companies.⁴²

The one- sided criticism of the relations between developed countries' donors and developing countries NGOs is based on a simplistic view of the cultural and political struggles in advanced countries, dismissing their different political and ideological currents. Many first world foundations oppose the governments of their own countries and their agendas do not support the dominant policy orientations. In many cases they had an important role in supporting resistance to dictatorships which were blessed by the US government as well as supporting independent research centers,⁴³ fruitful local advocacy and social projects. The transference of agendas doesn't mean that local NGOs have no room for maneuver or that the imported agendas are not filtered by local conditions.⁴⁴ But undoubtedly the issues, priorities and policies of developed countries and the boards of international organizations tend to disregard or underplay the different priorities, challenges and needs of the countries in which they act.⁴⁵

To claim that NGOs in Latin America have become a substitute for the state in delivering social policies is unsustainable: their capacity to deliver social public goods is extremely limited. The stronger the economy of the country the more this is true: in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Venezuela or Mexico, to cite the most powerful economies on the continent, it is unreasonable to expect that NGOs would be capable of

41 See, for instance, on Latin America, James Petras (2000) and on Africa, Firoze Manji and Carl O'Coill (2002).

42 For an analysis of the Brazilian case, see Bernardo Sorj (2000)

43 On the role played by the Ford Foundation in Brazil, see Bernardo Sorj, 2002)

44 See for instance Bila Sorj, Aparecida Moraes analysis of the "translation" of feminist oriented policies in Brazil (2005).

45 See Anthony Bebbington and Diana Mitlin (1996).

substituting state policies. At the best they are being contracted by governments to implement local services, an important issue on which there is still need for in-depth studies. In Latin America the main problem is not NGOs substituting the state, but rather increasing their capacity to become an autonomous partner with the state through advancing innovative projects that can be transformed into social policies and having a more productive relationship with the political system and social movements.

Finally, Erik Reinert's (2005) concept of "welfare colonialism" which characterizes international aid as only acting on the symptoms of poverty while supporting an economic model that maintains the status quo is a powerful reminder that beyond the discussion of more effective social policies and civil society solidarity actions developing countries need to advance their own development agendas, absorbing technologies and channeling local entrepreneurial and material resources according to their relative position in the international system.

NGOs currently confront multiple challenges

The challenges faced by NGOs are one expression of the general issue of democratic institution- building in contemporary societies in which the de-differentiation of sub-systems (Niklas Luhman, 2001) and individualization and the de-institutionalization of values (Danilo Martuccelli, 2000) are central tendencies. By the de-differentiation of sub-systems we mean the increased blurring of societal sub-system frontiers, through the interpenetration and colonization of the various spheres of power (for instance, economic power influencing scientific research, judiciary influence on political decisions, media impact on politics, and in general the pervasiveness of private sector influence on the different areas of social life). By the de-institutionalization of values we mean the increasing detachment of individual values and identity-formation from state institutions (in particular the school) as well as the decline of traditional institutions of representation (trade-unions, professional bodies, political parties).⁴⁶

These tendencies are reflected in the formation and dynamics of NGOs. The effacing of frontiers between subsystems expresses itself in the colonization of NGOs by the state, international agencies and the market, while the identification with transnational values and agendas are both facilitated and reinforced by NGOs' universal agendas and the formation of a trans-national elite of professional activists. These tendencies and their internal dynamics confront NGOs with a complex set of challenges. In the following section we will introduce some prescriptive elements in our analysis:⁴⁷

1) *A tendency towards concentration, consolidation of brand names and professionalization.*

In the last decade, similarities can be observed between some developments in the world of NGOs and in the private sector. There seems to be an enormous concentration of human and financial resources in a few NGOs.⁴⁸ This is due primarily to the fact that

⁴⁶ On this issue see Bernardo Sorj, 2004.

⁴⁷ In this section we advance some point made in Bernardo Sorj 2003.

⁴⁸ In Brazil, according to the IBGE study (op. cit.), less than 0.2% of NGOs employ a third of the NGOs staff members..

foundations and international agencies tend mostly to support NGOs with a solid track record together with the more stringent demands of donors which involve an enormous amount of bureaucratic work in project formulation, monitoring and accountancy, and often they need also to advance part of the grant. This concentration is accompanied by the formation of brand names that become synonymous with the causes they defend and with “quality”, creating entry barriers to new NGOs. Some brand name NGOs in developed countries even have the capacity for self financing through fund raising campaigns with public donors, or at least largely diminishing the dependency on governmental support.

Their large size as well as the requirement of donors for sophisticated proposals and reports increases the need for specialized staff, although due to their financial instability most NGOs have difficulty paying competitive salaries. The professionalization of NGOs produces some tension in the recruiting of staff, between the demands of a moral ethos that attracts people willing to accept lower-than-market salaries –but who are not always fully qualified–, and a professional ethos that calls for highly qualified personnel with their accompanying expectations for higher salaries and vision of NGOs as a business structure. This is a problem faced by NGOs throughout the world, and the professionalization of medium and large NGOs is well under way, spurred on by new requirements from financing agencies.

The differential power between NGOs raises the question of the possible monopolization of the field by a few giants, who like any large organizations have a tendency towards centralization, bureaucratization and diminished creativity. However, they may also deliver efficient services, monitoring results and attract more qualified cadres. The increasing barriers to entry in the field are particularly strong in relation to small community NGOs and have become a general factor of strain between large and small NGOs.

2 – Making explicit the differences and conflicts between NGOs.

Paradoxically NGOs own “public space” is very limited. Most supporters of ecological causes cannot explain the differences between, say, Greenpeace and WWF. NGOs don’t debate between themselves, and even their exchange of experiences is relatively limited. In other words, the world of NGOs is extremely politicized in reference to the outside world but extremely depolitized as regards its own hinterland. One reason for this is the orientation of NGOs towards advancing demands on the state, the market or international institutions, and never explicitly confronting their own views. This creates the myth, especially in developing countries, of civil society as a unitary actor that shares the same values against a corrupt state and an inhuman market. If NGOs want to create more effective coalitions they will need to confront their differences and discover affinities between themselves.

The self-presentation of civil society as a somewhat homogeneous voice in fact represses internal debate, making NGOs’ life too easy through a discourse that fights against the usual “enemies”, but which does not help to deepen the debate about their own problems and alternative solutions to concrete issues. New creative thinking requires that the different organizations of civil society confront their perspectives, criticize each other and learn from each other’s mistakes. The world of NGOs needs to accept the fact that contradictions both of perception and interests exist between NGOs

from the South and the North and within each national society. Making these differences explicit is fundamental for reconnecting NGOs to the political system.

3 – Understanding the different dynamics and challenges faced by advocacy-oriented and social projects-oriented NGOs.

Advocacy oriented NGOs have a different logic, perception and experience than those of *social projects (also called ‘development’) oriented NGOs*. Although most NGOs tend to act in both fields, one field is usually dominant. The problems posed by the advocacy-orientation are different from those involved in the social project-orientation. Advocacy NGOs which advance universal agendas are much more detached from specific national issues and often distant from the practical difficulties of implementing their agendas. It is much more difficult to monitor and evaluate the impact of advocacy activities. In most cases their main activity is to reach the media directly or indirectly through impact-actions or press-releases that produce media interest.

The main difficulty for the social projects of NGOs is the limited time span of support for their projects. The social projects of NGOs normally have a life cycle equivalent to the period of outside financing. Although there is an increasing pressure from donors that the projects become self-sustaining after a short period in most cases this is not a realistic demand. The real issue is not so much about self-sustainability of the projects but rather whether they can become a model for public policy and /or the market, the only ones which in the long-run have the material and human resources to adopt the new solutions in a sustained and systematic way.

Most NGO social projects are *ad hoc* local actions, undoubtedly relevant for the target communities, but without a large-scale societal impact for the simple reason that generally they are not replicable given the available local resources. Instead of pioneering or complementing government action, all too often they end up becoming showcases. However the criticism that is often raised that NGOs have become a substitute for state policies under the neo-liberal agenda is, as we mentioned above, unsustainable. NGOs cannot deliver security, justice, urban services, large-scale education or health services. The NGOs at most are being used by the state to complement or support their policies, and we need more research to evaluate the importance of their contribution to state policies.

Given the rigidity and bureaucratic nature of the state, NGOs have an important role to play as social laboratories, sources of innovation, developers of new techniques for social intervention, and eventually, as implementers and supporters of government action. But the ability of NGOs to innovate is only relevant to the extent that the experiments they develop are transformed into public policy and/or attract the attention of private enterprise to the potential of low-income communities as producers, consumers and labor markets. For this to happen, NGO action must go beyond amateurish projects, whose particularities, functional logic, unrealistic financing, and management make them non-replicable. Too often the actions of many NGOs resemble a cemetery of well-intentioned projects.

NGOs need constant external support to create and experiment with social projects, which are all too often cancelled when funding dries up. While there is some truth to the argument that NGOs are more efficient than the public sector under equal conditions

they may often however be extremely wasteful of human and financial resources due to the short life cycle of their projects.

NGO social projects should have a well-defined format, managerial structure and evaluation system that can lead to their reproduction on a large scale, thus allowing them to be taken over eventually by the market or transformed into public policy. NGOs should be trained in how to overcome amateurism and create social projects whose success doesn't depend solely on the good will and sacrifice of NGO staff and/or external financing. This can be done by creating prototypes that can be transformed into public policies. Without such training, local efforts will likely result in little more than temporary improvements, or at best, the social improvement of small groups targeted by the projects.

As donors don't want to support projects for more than a determinate period of time (normally short) most NGO social projects don't survive. Donor bureaucracies prefer not to acknowledge this fact and many of them produce reports (usually in extremely fancy and expensive editions) in which they present success stories of projects they have supported, most of which have already been buried by the time the report circulates. Financial instability not only puts the continuation of projects at risk but makes it difficult to recruit qualified personnel, especially when executive experience is required. Sometimes sheer size serves as an antidote. Large size permits the accumulation of a critical mass of resources that allow for the maintenance of a permanent team of qualified professionals in spite of fluctuations in cash flow and to cover the cost of pilot programs before formal financing has been secured.

4 – Accountability, transparency, stake-holders' partnership and evaluation.

There is a mounting pressure from donors and also from sectors critical of NGOs' work to increase their transparency and accountability. The main method proposed is that of monitoring and evaluating the impact of their activities. Though a reasonable demand, the methodology to be pursued is far from obvious.⁴⁹ Some of the major problems related to the demand of increasing monitoring and evaluation of results include:

a) Evaluating the impact of social projects implies not only identifying their consequences for a given target population but also their long-term sustainability and their potential for transformation into a solution which can be converted into public policies or absorbed by the market. This type of evaluation implies taking a long-term view beyond the time cycle of the project itself taking into account that project maturation and public or market impact take effect over a longer period of time. Neither donors nor NGOs work within a time framework beyond the period under which the project is in effect. In fact, donor bureaucracy is not much interested in knowing the long-term consequences of their grants. Sometimes donors make use of outside experts, but in many cases these experts have limited independence, and often come from developed countries with insufficient knowledge and sensibility to local conditions. Most NGOs have no resources to follow up on the consequences of their projects. As soon as one project is underway they move on to find support for a different one. And, in any case, it is not very realistic to ask for self-evaluation when own's survival is at stake.

⁴⁹ See Michael Edwards, Alan Fowler (2003) for a systematic discussion on NGOs management issues. See also David Lewis, 1999 and Helmut K. Anheier, 2000.

b) Advocacy projects are even more difficult to evaluate due to the complex number of factors involved in increasing public awareness. The time frame of their impact is normally greater than that of social projects and more diffuse. As stated by a study on African Civil Society: “The studies demonstrate that the contribution made by civil society organizations to democracy is not only manifest in the extent of their ability to influence policy and legislation. If measured on the basis of this criterion alone their impact would be judged to be very minimal. But the evidence demonstrates that the contribution of civil society organizations to democracy extends to their ability to foster participation and deliberation, to build leadership capacity and to nurture values of tolerance and consensus building, all of which are a function of internal democratic practices. It’s capacity to offer citizens a say in decisions and to enhance pluralism may be as important as the ability to influence decision-making and demand accountability from state actors.” (Mark Robinson and Steven Friedman, 2005: 40).

c) Demanding monitoring and evaluation of the results of the projects only increases the entry barriers for community or small NGOs without the human resources to apply complex methodologies. The obsession with monitoring and evaluation can lead to support only for projects that are more adaptable to accountability criteria and obvious impact, hence excluding more innovative and creative projects.

d) The development by each national association of NGOs of a Code of Ethics, which will define the internal principles that orient NGOs internally and in their relations with other stakeholders (the state, international organizations, private firms) would help to increase NGOs public accountability.

e) Probably neither NGOs nor donors are the best qualified to evaluate the projects in which they are involved. What is increasingly needed are local institutions, with intellectual capacity and independence, capable of producing methodologies of evaluation adapted to local conditions. In addition there is the need for conceptual frameworks to understand the role of NGOs so as to enhance their self-reflexivity, and compile and compare their experiences as well as assess the long term impacts of their projects.

5- Including the World of Work in the NGOs Agendas.

The world of labor is not within the scope of most NGOs. The subject is touched on tangentially through issues like gender, fair trade and children’s rights (mostly through the lens of advanced countries’ realities) but labor rights (including salaries and working hours) within private enterprises and informal labor social rights are generally outside the scope of most NGOs. Sometimes the label ‘socially responsible’ is given to enterprises engaging in outside social projects while they at the same time practice regressive labor policies. Without including the world of labor and employment in their agendas -a central factor of income distribution- NGOs will be unable to advance overall strategies for fighting poverty, social inequality and new strategies for economic development.

The tendency of INGOs to emphasize the conflict between rich and poor countries leads them to underplay the importance of national inequalities within developing and developed countries. While the North/South divide calls mainly for increasing humanitarian help to developing countries, internal inequalities are much more a

political issue which implies a confrontation of social interests that cannot be dissolved in general demands for human rights. The over emphasis on identity groups' rights has relegated the overall issue of working conditions to a second plane (Michael Piore, 1995). The fragmentation of social causes and the multiplication of specialized NGOs has led to a dispersion of energies and to over-looking the more unifying issues that can lead to improvement in the living conditions of the poorest sectors of the population. Advancing identity groups' causes without changing the overall conditions of the labor market and social policies has a limited effect on improving the general living conditions of the poor and lower middle classes.

6 - Reducing the dependency of southern NGOs on northern agendas.

Societies are still national and their strategies for integration into the globalization process should be national and regional; global agendas for development do not exist with the exception of some general formulas (like the Tobin tax or debt relief). Each society needs to make the best use of its local resources and creativity. By insisting on global proposals, be it from the World Bank or from Attac, there is a tendency to propose the same formulas for every country. The Global Social Forum's demands are presented at such a level of abstraction that they are basically moral and normative recommendations with no practical relevance. Their main focus is the global multilateral organizations, which also constitutes the principal target of INGOS. Their purely normative stand is a way of creating an artificial consensus allowing them to avoid confronting their differences. While targeting multilateral agencies is an important task it is not necessarily the priority of civil societies in developing countries.

It should be recognized that we are far from the reality of a global civil society. This is not only, as many argue because of September 11th, the fight against terrorism and the backlash produced by U.S. intervention in Iraq and the Bush government's anti-multilateralist posture. Of course current U.S. policies have had important negative effects on the advancing of multilateralist and internationalist agendas. Supporters of global civil society in the 1990s, however, tended to have a naïve perception of world politics and blindness to the continued importance of nation-states in the making of international politics, including within the transnational world of civil societies.

The dependency on outside sources of financing, at least for developing countries' organizations, has distorted their agenda. The imposition of agendas by major advanced country donors promotes a diverse array of partnerships, sometimes quite open to the demands of local NGOs but always using their discretionary power (Townsend et al. 2002).⁵⁰ Just as problematic is the position of many INGOS which at times act as colonial powers absorbing some of the best local cadres to advance projects which are not necessarily the priorities of local peoples.

Most of the International NGOs' research in or on developing countries is principally oriented toward confirming their own assumptions, while most third world NGOs have little or no internal research capabilities.⁵¹ The main weakness of NGOs in developing countries is their intellectual fragility and limited capacity for absorbing the best of international policy agendas while maintaining autonomous and creative thinking. For instance, in Latin America in the 50's and 60's CEPAL played the role of think tank

50 See Edwards, Michael, David Hulme (1997). For a very critical analysis of the "aid industry" see Alison Van Rooy, 1999.

⁵¹ On this issue see Caroline Harper (2001).

for the entire continent. Today this type of think tank does not exist. The reconstruction of creative local, national and regional thinking is made difficult by the internationalization of academic research and the North/South networks which marginalize horizontal south/south contacts, even at the regional level. International donors' policy in the last decade to support mainly 'action' projects has been particularly harmful to research activities. Policy oriented research centers in developing countries devoted to this endeavor could greatly contribute to making sense of accumulated experience and help orient NGOs activities to define a national/regional agenda. The challenge for southern civil societies is to increase their think tank capabilities in order to produce autonomous centers of reflection that will orient the action of local civil society organizations.

7- Creating interactions between NGOs, citizens and political parties.

Professionalization, project-finance orientation and dependency on foreign resources and agendas has led NGOs in developing country to become relatively detached from their national political agendas and social movements and citizen participation. While in the bibliography NGOs and social movements are presented as twin concepts the reality is considerably different. Many NGOs in developing countries are relatively isolated operations and have become producers of projects for outside donors and their relations with their target public have become increasingly instrumental. Reconnecting (which does not mean being subsumed) with social movements, other civil society organizations, political parties and citizens is a major challenge for NGOs so as not to become an isolated elite of (relatively well paid jet-setter) activists. In Latin America the feeling of abandonment by the poorest sectors of the population is leading to the rise of populist leaders directly 'connected' to the poor, bypassing civil society organizations.

The risk of NGOs being either colonized by international agencies or by the state and the market at the local level can not be averted by retreating to isolation or radical rhetoric but only by engaging them with proposals for new forms of citizen participation to democratize state institutions and economic power. Media campaigns although useful, cannot substitute for the importance of participatory social movements and the establishment of institutionalized mechanisms for increasing the State's delivery of public goods, transparency and accountability.

This implies that NGOs should become an autonomous and engaged player with other political actors. The experience of many NGOs in Latin America has swung from alienation from political parties to uncritical support, like the one given by most independent NGOs to the Workers Party in Brazil.⁵² Engaging in interaction and debates with political parties, trade-unions and congressmen will help NGOs go beyond demand-oriented agendas, confront the issue of limited state resources, and create realistic proposals and an inclusive societal agenda. NGOs can play a democratizing role if they see themselves as part of the national political system, confronting the problems of governance, wealth distribution, labor rights and democratization of the state. In other words the relevance of NGOs depends finally on their capacity to be part of shaping national democratic systems, reinventing political

⁵² This identification was due not to the common political roots of NGOs and PT leaders but rather to a similar tendency of the Worker's Party and NGOs to engage in moralistic anti-neoliberal discourse without tackling the issue of alternative ways to elaborate and implement alternative policies.

parties, promoting citizens' participation in state institutions and strengthening political parties instead of being part of the process of delegitimizing them.

8 - Networking and Representation in the International System.

NGOs base their legitimacy on the principle that they embody moral claims which are self-evident. As such, they demand to be heard and have a place in international organisms, in particular in the United Nations system.⁵³ Although so far NGOs haven't achieved effective influence within the United Nations system, the world summits have been key moments for the NGOs to consolidate their influence in national and international public opinion (Mario Pianta, 2005).

NGOs not only downplay the issue of how they represent the voice of the people, but also the problem of internal representation: which are the NGOs that represent the galaxy of NGOs? This is even more the case with the international NGOs who claim to represent the voice of global civil society. As we have argued above NGOs from the South and the North as well those from different countries in all regions have different positions on many issues. International organizations should recognize the importance of assuring a role for NGOs from different nations and regions and their different perspectives. Increasing the voice of NGOs from the South is even more important considering that normally the richer NGOs can afford the cost of financing a permanent lobbying presence in international organizations. Recognizing their differences will allow NGOs to organize different coalitions representative of their diversity.

While major NGOs from developed countries are capable of establishing alliances between themselves to advance common campaigns this is much more difficult for NGOs in developing countries. Networking has become a catchword to counter the problem of the enormous fragmentation in the world of NGOs. The merit of donors to promote cooperation between NGOs at the international and national level must be recognized. However, converging NGOs efforts and interests is particularly difficult due to the silent but nevertheless fierce competition between NGOs which militates against cooperative projects. Often the results of forced cooperation are fruitful but most of the networks are short-lived and are only a strategy to adapt to donors' demand. Keeping networks alive is normally a very expensive activity. The belief that the Internet is sufficient to create stable and functioning networks of institutions is unrealistic. In fact the Internet has multiplied the availability of information and contacts to such a level that people only access and mostly contact the counterparts that are already partners in common projects. Of course this is not only a problem of NGOs but given that they have common goals the level of waste of resources is particularly high.

9 - On not mystifying grassroots and activism.

The increasing tendency of international donors and major NGOs to support ethnic identity groups and empower local people, may at times be a case of creating identities that never really existed or shaping pre-existing identities to the image that

⁵³ The proposal for increasing the role of civil society in the United Nations, elaborated in 2004 on the request of the Secretary-General, by the Panel of Eminent Persons, chaired by President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, see www.un.org/dpi/ngosection/N0437641.pdf and Miguel Darcy 2005. See also Riva Krut (1997) and for a more nuanced perspective on the possibilities of civil society intervention in multilateral organizations see Shepard Forman (2004) and Stephen Toulmin (1994).

international donors suppose is the correct one.⁵⁴ The so-called local culture is always a mix of various traditions that can be interpreted in many ways and *ethnicity* is itself a culturally biased concept, which has different meanings in the everyday life of most countries.

There is also a tendency to mystify grassroots and local activism as an aim in itself and the principal source of wisdom, forgetting the links that they have with the wider national political system and public policies. Many of the problems related to the advancement of an alternative agenda for democratization of state institutions require an effort of elaboration that goes beyond (although it should not obliterate) the local perspective. How to advance national agendas and keep in touch with local actors is a major challenge both for civil society and government bodies.

In some cases, like the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, a large number of community leaders are directly involved or indirectly at risk of blackmail by drug traffickers. This alone would be sufficient reason not to leave the management of projects entirely up to local residents. But those who emphasize the empowerment of communities would argue that this is circumstantial, and thus temporary. This vision relies on an idealized and thus distorted view of the community. These communities are frequently controlled by oligarchic structures which without external control tend to back projects that at best reinforce their power, and at worst channel scarce resources in their own interests.

While local participation is fundamental it should not lead to the myth of an 'alternative' discourse based on local knowledge, which has been adopted by many large foundations. It is important to value the expression of local communities and their leaders, but without mystifying them as the sole source of knowledge

Rather than celebrating pre-existing identities which have been ignored or restrained by the dominant culture, the central issue is that of transforming the self-image of the poorer sectors as well as the negative image that other social groups have of them by creating new forms of cultural and social integration with the wider society. Instead of opposition and isolation, the goal should be to integrate them into national social and cultural life. Social prejudice, a journalistic ethos of high-impact news, and even well-intentioned international cooperation which focuses on social exclusion tends to present poor communities in a negative light, as sites of violence and suffering. Without denying these problems, NGOs should try to create bridges between different sectors of society by presenting a more nuanced and multifaceted view of the life of the poor. At the same time NGOs should not confuse solidarity and vocalization of the needs of low-income groups with actual representation of these groups. Solidarity cannot and should not be confused with representation, since no matter how well intentioned it amounts to a kind of usurpation.

10 - The contradiction between sovereignty and individual- rights bearers cannot be solved on the basis of principles only.

Northern NGOs base their activities on the assumption that the principal of sovereignty is superseded by internationalist humanitarianism and human rights. While there are

⁵⁴ One of the most questionable types of initiatives is the Ford Foundation program of affirmative action in Brazil, it shows a lack of understanding of the particularities of racism in Brazil in relation to the US.. See Peter Fray ? (2005).

situations that require some type of external intervention, sovereignty is considered in most developing countries as a mechanism of self-defense against the imperial tendencies of the stronger nations.⁵⁵ Yugoslavia's crisis⁵⁶, the recent invasion and occupation of Iraq and national legislation that permits the pursuit of presumed political criminals from other countries has produced second thoughts in many developing countries' civil society sectors on the complex issues involved in bypassing national sovereignty.⁵⁷ The same goes for ecological causes advanced by developed countries that may hamper economic development or constrain imports based on criteria that may be used as invisible trade barriers. International human rights and ecological activists need to engage with local civil societies in developing countries if they are not to be seen as imperial oriented organizations.

Although the principle of sovereignty was always relative, in particular for weaker nations, it should not be readily dismissed as hampering the implementation of the human rights agendas. External intervention is always a traumatic experience and imposing democratic regimes is, in many cases, destined to failure, especially if the external agenda is imposed on internal social realities.⁵⁸ The conditions and extent under which interventions in humanitarian crises should be undertaken must be weighed both on the basis of principles and against the backlash it may produce at the national and regional level.

11 - Human rights are insufficient to provide policy orientation in situations of open violence or where cultural clashes are present and can be manipulated by partisan interests.

The defense of human rights through denouncing violations is an important task on which NGOs have played a central role. However, human rights militants have enormous difficulties in confronting the practical realities of violent situations in which the police and/or the armed forces must use physical repression. Of course the use of repression ought to be accompanied by the respect for human rights and associated with preventive policies to improve the social conditions which are conducive to crime and violence. One cannot ignore, however, the need for confronting violent groups with repressive measures. NGOs ignoring the demand of society for an effective public security system only push the population into the hands of governments that propose repressive agendas (see, for instance, the case of President Uribe's popularity in Colombia). Human rights discourse should be related to active proposals on the role of the police and armed forces in situations of conflict, and should be capable of assessing situations of risk and violence and the appropriate use of force when needed. A tendency to criticize primarily state repressive actions coupled with leniency, and sometimes even rationalizations for civil violence tend to alienate human rights groups from the rest of the population. Human rights groups should recognize and denounce civil violence, both as a matter of principle and as the only practical way to find wider support for developing a working relationship with the security forces.

⁵⁵ For the Latin American case see Bernardo Sorj (2005). For a general criticism of the internationalist human rights vision see Danilo Zolo (1997, 2002).

⁵⁶ A critical analysis of OTAN intervention can be found in Danilo Zolo (2002). On humanitarian wars see also David Chandler (2002)

⁵⁷ As was the request for Pinochet's judgment in Spain, seen by many democratic militants in Chile as an intervention in their internal affairs.

⁵⁸ See David Chandler (2002).

The wish to be inclusive and open to every culture leads many theorists of civil society to believe that it is possible to be completely open to non-western cultures. This is a naïve presumption that ignores that there are limits to accepting other cultures' values, some of which even deny the possibility of a democratic civil society. In practice, values cannot be stretched to such a point that endangers the possibility of their own existence without which openness to other values wouldn't be possible. Deliberative democracy supposes that the social actors agree beforehand on the value of deliberative democracy.⁵⁹ The solution for this contradiction is not theoretical but practical and will need to be negotiated in each context (for instance the conflict between women's rights and cultures that from a liberal perspective oppress women).

Human rights organizations sometimes mask clearly defined political agendas and their priorities are a far cry from those of the universality of extolled values, as was evident during the 2001 conference against racism in Durban, where the Israeli/Palestinian conflict became the main issue for many NGOs participating at the meeting. The logic behind these organizations reminds that of the communist-sponsored 'fronts' of years past in that they employ a discourse that condemns the failure to respect human rights, but aiming to condemn only the 'political enemy.'

Conclusions: Advancing national civil society agendas in global contexts and global agendas based on national realities

In a world in which social relations and values are increasingly plastic and individualized and the old political ideologies and their vectors –trade unions and political parties- are in disarray, the idea of civil society and the practice of NGOs has become an anchor for many in finding a way to express their desire to improve the world. However civil societies in general and NGOs in particular are under the influence of the same factors – unequal economic, social, political and cultural power which is vitiating the functioning of democracy worldwide.

Hasty generalizations about the globalization process and global civil society have produced a tendency to overlook the continued central role of the national state and national societies in forming cultural identities, and in creating and distributing wealth. I am not diminishing the obvious impact of globalization processes, but as the Chinese saying goes “when the bamboo is leaning too much to one side we need to push it the other way to make it straight”.

Democratic construction continues to be associated with nation-building and the consolidation of the feeling of being part of one people with a common fate. This means the capacity of creating affective links between the people and governments and political leaders capable of responding to the more urgent material demands and delivering a symbolic discourse with which most of the population can identify. The discourse of human rights is too universal and abstract to become the basis on which this sense of belonging can be created. NGOs most probably are not oriented to fulfill this function in the political system, but if they do not want to find themselves bypassed by political leaders that appeal directly to the people they will need to increase their

⁵⁹ See Neera Chandhooke (1995).

cooperation with social movements, the wider civil society organizations, political parties and parliaments.

It is not only the material realities of everyday life that make nations the main reference for the majority of the citizens. Collective narratives and the construction of political will cannot be based on abstract principles (the food of middle- class intellectuals) but needs to be related to common history and experiences, which so far can only be found, at least for the majority of people, within a territorial reference. Democracy is not a narrative that can be imposed with good will messages or ad-hoc activities, though both help, but is a complex process of social participation -involving the creation of accountable institutions⁶⁰ coupled with sustained economic development and redistribution of wealth.

Globalization agendas are not a substitute for the formulation of national projects, although national agendas need to appropriate and answer the challenges of economic and cultural globalization. In developing countries this process involves effective wealth redistribution, reorganizing the body politic, re-elaborating mechanisms of representation for all, but in particular, for the poorest sectors of the population. The demand for human rights increases the expectations of the population while the failure of the political system to deliver the goods may create frustration thus playing into the hands of demagogic leaders. The divorce between the system of demand (civil society) and the system of delivery (the parties and government) is a source of delegitimation of representative democracy if the demands are not met by the political system. Thus increasing the articulation between both sub-systems is strategic for strengthening democracy.

Civil societies in general and NGOs in particular can be central players in improving democratic life but they need to reconnect to the local population, developing projects and agendas linked to their context going beyond the affirmation of universal agendas and values.

Rio de Janeiro, November, 2005

⁶⁰ See Guillermo O'Donnell (1999).

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