

Civil Society and the future work of social change.

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Many civil society organisations in the funded business of social change have been overtaken by the very thing they have been pursuing. Changes in the context around social development organisations are demanding that they reflect deeply on what they do, how they do it, and on the very identity of what they should become if they are to remain relevant to the demands of the time.

The changing context in broad brush strokes¹.

The history of funded (or aided) development is most often traced back just over 60 years to the 'European Recovery Programme' initiated by the United States in 1948 after World War II. The intention was to build relationships through helping to rebuild European economies after the end of the war in order to prevent the spread of Soviet communism.

As the European countries started recovering they too incorporated development aid into their relationships with countries considered to be less developed. Development aid played a significant role in shaping political and economic relationships throughout the cold war period.

Around two decades ago, a series of events began to dramatically change the world order. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 coincided with the return to democracy in Chile after Pinochet's dictatorship. The demise of the Soviet Union led to democratic movements and regimes in central Asia, Eastern and Central Europe. Around the world, epochal changes were taking place; the end of apartheid in South Africa and its new democratic president Nelson Mandela in 1994; the democratic regime in Cambodia in 1993; economic liberalisation in India in 1991; and the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in China in 1989. Three trends seemed to coalesce simultaneously around the world nearly two decades ago – the rise of democracy, the globalisation of economy and the voice of civil society. There was a resurgence of the concept and meaning of civil society in this period. In its new incarnation, civil society began to be heard, seen, talked and written about around the world.

Over this period a new world order seems to be emerging. Economic power is moving East focusing on China and India but including other emerging markets. In Europe and North America post-war models of the welfare state are shifting and weakening. Democratic politics has been captured in many countries by wealth and business interests. The dramatic economic growth of the past decades is now threatened by the limits of planetary resources, already reflected in food shortages, energy prices and climate changes.

¹ This section draws directly from the synthesis report of the 'Civil Society @ Crossroads' programme in which CDRA participated. It was compiled by Rajesh Tandon of PRIA
<http://www.pria.org/docs/CS@CR%20Global%20Synthesis%20Summary.pdf>

Citizens around the world are seeking a new social compact in which their individual and collective interests are not surrendered to the vagaries of power-seeking politics or profit-seeking markets. In this period of two decades, civil society has also undergone dramatic shifts. In the early 1990s, the international aid system saw great possibility in increasing financial support to civil society. This resulted in a rapid and enormous increase in the recognition of and funding to civil society strengthening programmes in the developing regions. Support to civil society was seen by international donors as a contribution to the processes of democratisation and economic liberalisation that could overcome poverty and marginalisation. These socio-economic and political arrangements have begun to unravel.

Looking at the role of civil society differently²

In stopping to contemplate the future of civil society development organisations playing different roles in the future, the first challenge is to look at and see them differently. Human society is being challenged to develop and adopt an ecological understanding of the world and their relationship to it. As a part of this attempt to see the world anew an ecological living systems view of civil society is explored. Civil society is viewed as a dynamic integral part of the life process of human society, and in turn human society is seen as an interdependent part of larger living systems that support life in all its forms. Living systems are best grasped as a dynamic, evolving, infinitely interconnected and interactive, ongoing, patterned process of creativity and decay. Below an attempt is made to describe in words an (inevitably inadequate) picture of civil society as a dynamic living system.

The periphery of the system is populated by people in all their diversity ‘organised’ in families, communities, interest groups, and organisations of all forms and sizes coming together to pursue activities to meet common needs of all descriptions. These organisations include sport and recreational activities; people coming together to address child-care and health needs; food production; people building and producing the things they need; people exchanging and trading; interest groups exploring pursuing and promoting what is important to them, people learning with and from each other; people coming together to make difficult decisions about how to share and to protect themselves. These are but a few examples of a myriad of every-day human activity. Collectively these activities constitute *“our species’ response to the basic human need to come together in pursuit of common goals”*. This is how Ingrid Srinath (Secretary General of CIVICUS) defines the essence of civil society.³

This aspect of the picture tries to capture the dynamic nature of a living system made up of individual elements in relationship to each other, in relationship to the smaller elements of which they are each constituted, and in relationship to the larger systems of which they are small parts. The picture depicts civil society as the creative foundation, the wellspring, of human interaction and relationship out of which more formal organs (organisations and eventually institutions) of society emerge. It is driven by an endless and ever-changing process of development in response to changing needs, wants and environments. The picture emphasises the fact that, as an integral part

² For this section I acknowledge CAFOD who elicited much of the thinking by inviting me to address them on the themes of ‘the call of creation’ and ‘future fit’.

³ http://www.osisa.org/sites/default/files/article/files/Bridging%20the%20Gaps%20-%20Citizens%20%20Organisations%20and%20Dissociation_Part1_0.pdf

of their essential social nature, human individuals organise into systems of varying size complexity and purpose. This picture recognises that civil society is not always 'civil' in the qualitative sense – it organises in ways that can be both creative and destructive, inclusive and exclusive.

The next aspect of the picture jumps from the periphery to the centre – to the highest level of organisation where three overlapping central institutions of society coalesce. These represent the more formalised institutions of: the state; business (or the market); and formally organised civil society structures. These three overlapping circles are pictured – not with solid boundaries, but open and permeable membranes. Looking at the picture from this angle the following points of significance to civil society organisations are revealed:

- Formally constituted funded NGO type development organisations are but a minute and fairly recent part of civil society.
- Civil society is a dynamic source of all the formal institutions of society and is in dynamic tension with them, shaping and being shaped by its central institutions.
- The identity of formal NGO type civil society organisations is shaped by the dynamics of their relationships with the state, with business, and with those aspects or elements of broader civil society they attempt to serve.
- From the point of view of many at the periphery of society all these central institutions of society are at a crossroads. They are collectively failing to meet their respective societal functions in the face of the challenges of our time. The crux of the challenge is to find ways of organising human systems that do not extract and concentrate power and resources from human and other ecological systems in ways that impoverish the systems as a whole, as well as the individual elements within them.
- The more formal and central funded civil society organisations are facing a crisis of identity. They are of potential value to the state struggling in its attempts to deliver services to those most excluded. It is of potential value to business as it attempts to continue expanding its markets to pursue its need for constant growth. It is of potential value to those at the margins of society unable to access the resources they require to thrive, and unable to exercise their power over the systems that exclude them. There are choices to be made between promoting and supporting social business; tendering for delivery sub-contracts from government; and serving and facilitating the organising processes of civil society.

At this crossroad moment it is helpful for organisations considering their future role to locate themselves as a part of this dynamic ever-changing living system we call society. It is important to remember that we are all a part of and shaped by the systems we are trying to change. In the dynamic ever evolving and developing nature of living systems, organisations too are constantly evolving through stages and phases of development and transformation. As civil society organisations it is helpful to 'see' and understand ourselves as a product of this organising movement from periphery to the centre. And also to understand the forces that operate at the interface between the three institutions at the centre that shape our identity.

Rethinking, repositioning.

Civil society as a whole is not in crisis. It is a fluid, dynamic, unpredictable wellspring of social human energy coming together around meeting common need. At times its role in shaping society is overshadowed and its power is suppressed by the exercising of power and authority by the institutions at the centre. At other times it surprises even itself in how unexpectedly and forcefully it can come together in eruptions that force change after long periods of subtly acting as the seedbed of societal creativity.

But organised NGOs are at a crossroads along with the more organised institutions of society. In the process of redefining their identity NGOs must re-think and re-position themselves in their primary relationships with the state, business and larger civil society. This crisis of identity can either result in a process of creative renewal and strengthening or be a real threat to survival. For organisations to benefit from and thrive through the crisis they must use it to clarify their particular contribution and areas of competence and hone their skills. In order to grow and develop through the crisis there are fundamental identity choices to be made.

One of the means through which civil society shapes the larger societal system is through its formally constituted organisations engaging more closely with, or even being assimilated into, the state and the formal business sector. Many organisations are facing such choices now. Some NGO type civil society organisations are increasingly using their skill and relationship to connect those at the margins more closely to economic opportunities or the delivery of government services. Service delivery contracts with government are becoming a common means of resourcing NGOs. Others are engaging more with the fields of social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, corporate social investment and value chain development as means of linking impoverished communities into mainstream economic activity. The third area of strategic focus involves looking for the means to support community based organisations to organise around their own priorities towards becoming more effective in civic driven change. There is growth and opportunity in this field too. Concepts like active citizenship, asset based community development, social movements and civic driven change contribute to a growing discourse.

In re-configuring the identity of civil society organisations it is important to re-connect to the essential contribution of larger civil society – to its foundational formative, creative societal impulse. Nicanor Perlas refers to the function of civil society as ‘cultural creativity’. *“Culture is that realm which intuitively guides the ideas of society ... that gives identity and meaning, ... that develops the full potential of individuals and enables them to be competent participants in the economy, political life, culture and society-at-large. Culture deals with the entire realm of ideas and includes worldviews, knowledge, meanings, symbols, identity, ethics, art, and spirituality.”*⁴

No matter where civil society organisations are going to focus their future strategies, their edge, their unique societal contribution and competitive advantage comes from their rootedness in this

⁴ Perlas, N. (2000) *Shaping Globalization: Civil Society, Cultural Power and Threefolding*, Quezon City, Phillipines: Centre for Alternative Development Initiatives.

essential source of societal power. When entering into new relationships and roles it is important to re-connect to what is moving at the creative edges of civil society.

Examples of what is moving in civil society are drawn from stories capturing the state of civil society around the world through a programme called 'Civil Society at the Crossroads' (<http://www.pria.org/civil-society-at-crossroads->).

The stories emanating from a number of the social movement uprisings that have taken place in the world in recent years reveal a fascinating pattern (experience is drawn from countries such as Chile, Greece, Indonesia and the Occupy Movement in different countries – among others). What intrigues is that they are not organising their campaigns in in expected ways where forceful demands are made for particular solutions to the specific societal problem. They are protesting vociferously, and often very creatively, against systems that are clearly not working for their societies. They are very creatively 'framing' and highlighting the problems and their impact on citizens. In numerous examples there seems to be conscious acceptance that they do not yet have a clear vision of a preferred future solution. Instead, in the ways that they are organising themselves, they are experimenting with new forms of organisation that could be the foundation of transformative systemic solutions in the future. They are confidently organising and mobilising to highlight systems that are clearly not working without claiming to fully have the answer, but instead are seeking answers by experimenting in the ways they organise themselves.

Taking seriously how to organise effectively around 'not knowing' is a radical contribution from civil society to the call for social creativity and innovation. It puts ongoing learning, innovation and adaptation at the core of new ways of organising. In exploring this as a positive contribution the notion of 'experimentalism' as promoted by Roberto Unger was revealed when talking to one of the leaders of the Chilean student's movement. This represents a really creative alternative way of organising. In facing the challenges of our time this focus on building experimentation into our ways of being and doing is an antidote to hierarchical command and control systems that all too often result in and perpetuate impoverishment.

Leading questions.

In closing - a few questions to assist in exploring where the real work of social change organisations might lie in the future:

- How can we learn to see, understand and make meaning of how best to act in an interconnected, interdependent living world?
- How can we use our own organisations as living laboratories of social systemic experimentation?
- How can we bring more forcefully the creative contribution of civil society into our changing relationships and new partnerships?
- How can we contribute to finding new organisational practices that maximise the benefits of diversity, participation, co-ownership and co-creation – and minimise the tendency to 'lowest common denominator', risk-averse decision making and its resulting uncreative stuckness?

- What practices can we see at the creative fringes and movements of civil society that can contribute to societal innovation and transformation?

The last questions come from grappling with how one goes about contributing to designing new systems that you cannot yet see or imagine. Drawing from how industrial designers go about their work from a book titled “Design Thinking”⁵ the following three strategic areas are identified as common across all studies of the industrial design process:

- 1) Taking a broad ‘systems approach’ to the problem, rather than accepting narrow problem criteria.
- 2) Framing the problem in a distinctive and sometimes rather personal way.
- 3) Designing from ‘first principles’.

From these I end with the two final questions. As civil society organisations with our unique purpose, experience, relationships, and expertise:

- What are our distinctive ways of framing the problem?
- What are our first principles of design? (In industrial design these are the principles of physics and engineering – what might they be in the social realm?)

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⁵ ‘Design Thinking’ by Nigel Cross, Berg Publishers, New York, 2011