

Contestations in Global Civil Society

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Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
About the Contributors	ix
Foreword	xv
Chapter 1 Introduction: Global Civil Society <i>Roopinder Oberoi, Jamie P. Halsall and Michael Snowden</i>	1
Chapter 2 Unselfishness and Resilience: Social Capital in the Context of the Pandemic of COVID-19 <i>Ian G. Cook and Paresh Wankhade</i>	13
Chapter 3 Social Capital, Social Innovation and Social Enterprise: The Virtuous Circle <i>Roopinder Oberoi, Jamie P. Halsall and Michael Snowden</i>	29
Chapter 4 Does Fifth Industrial Revolution Benefit or Trouble the Global Civil Society? <i>Cátia Miriam Costa, Enrique Martínez-Galán and Francisco José Leandro</i>	45
Chapter 5 Networked Society and Governance: Algorithmic Default? <i>Tom Cockburn</i>	63
Chapter 6 The End of Neoliberalism? The Response to COVID-19: An Australian Geopolitical Perspective <i>Michael Lester and Marie dela Rama</i>	79

Chapter 7 Civil Society and Environmental Protection in Brazil: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back	
<i>Antônio Márcio Buainain and Junior Ruiz Garcia</i>	97
Chapter 8 Redefining Social Capital and Social Networks in Global Civil Society	
<i>Tom Cockburn and Cheryl Cockburn-Wootten</i>	119
Chapter 9 Role of Social Capital and Social Enterprise in China's Poverty Relief	
<i>Sam Yuqing Li and Qingwen Xu</i>	157
Chapter 10 Conclusion: A Shifting Recognition of Global Civil Society?	
<i>Roopinder Oberoi, Jamie P. Halsall and Michael Snowden</i>	173
Index	181

Acknowledgments

The original idea for this edited volume came from the 4th East Lake Forum on Global Governance, which took place in November 2018 at Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan, China. The theme at this international event was shared global governance and how this can be encompassed at a community level in the future. The editors of this book have long been interested in global civil society and how this is conceptualized in a local, national and global context. Over time, the concept of global civil society has drawn much critical focus from academics, policymakers and politicians.

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Foreword

This book duly deals with the varied dimensions around global civil society. The eloquent and unequivocal insights thrown upon social capital and its pertinence in neoteric cataclysmic times is splendid and remarkable. I express no doubt in ascertaining that the larger audience – readers, academics, researchers and students – would find the book comprehensible, aiding them in exploring the related concepts and ideas around the larger theme of global civil society. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc upon the administration around the world. Against that backdrop, it's only imperative to explore how governments and their governance responded to the challenges. But most importantly, civil society as we know it of yesteryear would have its nature transformed in the post-COVID world.

How civil societies tackled those pandemic-generated challenges and abridged the gap between state and societies is in itself a vital question. The book answers this quite explicably in by citing the major role undertaken by civil society organizations (CSOs) in filling any void left by governments all over the world – specifically in availing the requisite facilities to citizens.

It's noteworthy to mention that the intimate relationship between social capital and civil society is explained. In that light, what the book does is to create a progressive understanding in invoking the realization of roles played by CSOs in emergencies like the one we witnessed in the form of COVID-19 outbreak.

On that note, I take immense joy and pleasure in recommending this book. Many congratulations to the editor, the contributing authors and the publisher in coming out with such material that, if read diligently, would only cement the significance of global civil society and its futuristic roles.

Professor Rekha Saxena
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Global Civil Society

Roopinder Oberoi, Jamie P. Halsall and Michael Snowden

Abstract

This introductory chapter sets the overall context of global civil society in today's global world. The authors will firstly provide a definition of civil society from social and political science perspectives. Then secondly, the authors provide a contemporary overview of global civil society debates in the current social and political environment; they also offer a short examination of COVID-19 and how this global pandemic has developed new spheres of contestation and collaboration. In the final part of the chapter, the authors present a brief overview of each chapter contributed to this volume.

Keywords: Civil society; COVID-19; globalization; Global Civil Society; governments; organizations

Introduction

In relation to contemporary world politics, civil society is conceived as a political space where voluntary associations seek, outside political parties, to shape the rules that govern one other aspect of social life. Civil society groups bring citizens non-coercively in deliberate attempts to mould the formal and informal norms that regulate social interaction. (Scholte, 2004, p. 214)

As the above quotation illustrates, civil society, in a contemporary political context, is a somewhat complex concept (Allen, 1997; Blakeley, 2002; Lahiry, 2005; Powell, 2013). Politicians and academics of different political ideologies embrace the ideas around civil society. Since the 1990s, there has been a great assurgency of civil society as a political concept; this can be traced back to the political

events of the falling of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. Countries in Western Europe and the United States put their political faith in civil society, as it was seen at the time as a modernizing idea for the new information age.

According to Carothers and [Barndt \(1999\)](#), the historical beginnings of civil society originate with the Roman statesman, Marcus Tullius Cicero, and other Romans and philosophers. Interestingly, Carothers and [Barndt \(1999\)](#) go on to add that:

The modern idea of civil society emerged in the Scottish and Continental Enlightenment of the late 18th century. A host of political theorists, from Thomas Paine to Georg Hegel, developed the notion of civil society as a domain parallel to but separate from the state—a realm where citizens associate according to their own interests and wishes. This new thinking reflected changing economic realities: the rise of private property, market competition, and the bourgeoisie. It also grew out of the mounting popular demand for liberty, as manifested in the American and French revolutions. (p. 18)

Then, from this, the conceptual ideas of civil society were forgotten about due to the rise of the industrial revolution ([Carothers & Barndt, 1999](#)). But, civil society reemerged after the Second World War through the writings of Antonio Gramsci and his Marxist theories. In his books, Gramsci focused on the ideas of the state, dictatorships, and hegemony, and how these are bound together with civil society ([Öncü, 2003](#)). Gramsci's publications were instrumental, as noted by Carothers and [Barndt \(1999\)](#) who state:

in the 1970s and 1980s with persons fighting against dictatorships of all political stripes in Eastern Europe and Latin America, Czech, Hungarian, and Polish activists also wrapped themselves in the banner of civil society, endowing it with a heroic quality when the Berlin Wall fell. (p. 19)

Hence, historically, civil society is seen as the growth of civilization, as democracy and society is regulated through relationships. [Kumar \(1993\)](#) notes that civil society is social order driven, whereby citizens actively engage in public life by resolving disputes corresponding to the law of the country. Moving forward today, civil society is situated within the social, economic, political and cultural context, and is perceived as a “democratic catalyst” ([Karolewski, 2006](#), p. 168). As [Kumar \(1993\)](#) acknowledges:

Civil society has been found in the economy and in the polity; in the area between the family and the state, or the individual and the state; in non-state institutions which organize and educate citizens for political participation; even as an expression of the whole civilizing mission of modern society. (p. 383)

The social and political events concerning civil society have turbo-charged the concept, bringing it into focus globally, that is, “Global Civil Society.” In the 2002 Martin Wight memorial lecture, the British academic Mary Kaldor (2003) stated:

global civil society is a platform inhabited by activists (or post-Marxists), NGOs and neoliberals, as well as national and religious groups, where they argue about, campaign for (or against), negotiate about, or lobby for the arrangements that shape global developments. (p. 590)

As Kaldor acknowledges, civil society, in a global context, has many actors that can influence economic development. The premise of this edited book is to critique and demonstrate the ways in which the global community is dealing with a complex political world within the narrative of global civil society.

Defining Global Civil Society

There is no doubt that the conceptual provenance of the ideas of global civil society has been driven by the empowerment of globalization. McGrew (1992) observes that the concept of globalization “refers to the multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that transcend the nation-states (and by implications the societies) which make up the modern world system” (p. 65). The empowerment of globalization has been driven by the transportation and communication revolution, which has opened up the world and created new global connections. As Leyshon (1995) notes, “Advances in transport and communication technology have served to speed up the space of life and brought progressively more areas within the orbit of capitalist relations of production” (p. 29). For transportation, the level of innovation, especially in the twentieth century, has been a great. Examples include the introduction of air travel (e.g., Boeing 747 Jumbo Jet; Concorde) and high speed passenger trains (e.g., the bullet train, TGV). While for communication technologies, there have been numerous technological advancements, such as computers, mobile phones, and tablets, all of which have access the World Wide Web. The rise of communication technologies in global civil society has created a “Network Society,” and as Manuel Castells (2010) notes:

The new society is made up of networks. Global financial markets are built on electronic networks that process financial transactions in real time. The Internet is a network of computer networks. The electronic hypertext, linking different media in global/local connection, is made up of networks of communication – production studios, newsrooms, computerized information systems, mobile transmission units, and increasingly interactive senders and receivers. The global economy is a network of financial transactions, production sites, markets, and labor pools, powered by money, information, and business organizations. The network enterprise, as a new form of business organization, is made of networks of

firms or subunits of firms organized around the performance of a business project. Governance relies on the articulation among different levels of institutional decision making linked by information networks. And the most dynamic social movements are connected via the Internet across the city, the country, and the world. (p. 248)

The rapid development of globalization adds emphasis to the greater importance of global civil society. Martens, Dreher, and [Gaston \(2010\)](#) state:

The concept of global civil society has, when fully fulfilled, wonderful characteristics. The political pursuit of equality, transparency and accountability helps establish a new set of ethical norms taking into account the different circumstances around the world. (p. 576)

The intense relationship between globalization and global civil society has emerged due to the new form of global politics occurring across the world. These closer ties between globalization and global civil society can be perceived within three distinct paradigms (see [Table 1.1](#)).

With these emerging paradigms and the emphasis on its relationship with globalization, the social and political sciences have recentred their focus on global civil society. For example, [Corry \(2006\)](#) points out that globalization and global civil society concepts “have become ever more dependent upon each other” (p. 306) due to their global interconnectedness. More interestingly, [Corry \(2006\)](#) also notes that global civil society must be seen as “beyond the state” (p. 309) because it reaches out to global networks that create new ideas and values. Therefore, global civil society is defined as:

the myriad of individuals and institutions which operate under the principles of networking and voluntarism, outside of traditional institutions, and collectively seeking changes in the social order and inequalities, transcending individual interests and national boundaries. ([Gonzalez-Perez, 2013](#), p. 42)

The rapid development of global civil society has been triggered by the continuous focus on the third sector from public policy perspectives ([Bernauer & Gampfer, 2013](#); Keane, 2003; [Nanz & Steffek, 2004](#)). Organizations, such as charities, NGOs and social enterprise, have played a more important role in public policy-making in recent times. International organizations such as the United Nations (UN) have nurtured and maintained the concept of global civil society, strengthening the global community and supporting the networks of global citizens ([Juergensmeyer, 2013](#)). From this, governments across the world have engaged with the UN on their vision for global civil society.

Table 1.1. The Three Paradigms of Global Civil Society Set Out by Mary Kaldor (2003).

Paradigm One: *New Social Movements*

- “Developed after 1968 concerned with new issues, like peace, women, human rights, the environment, and new forms of protest
- The language of civil society seemed to express very well their brand of non-party politics
- The concept was enthusiastically taken up in South Asia, Africa – especially South Africa – and Western Europe
- During the 1990s, a new phenomenon of great importance was the emergence of transnational networks of activists who came together on particular issues – landmines, human rights, climate change, dams, AIDS/HIV, and corporate responsibility”

Paradigm Two: *New Policy Agenda*

- “Civil society was understood as what the West has; it is seen as a mechanism for facilitating market reform and the introduction of parliamentary democracy
- The key agents are not social movements but NGOs
- NGOs increasingly look both like quasi-governmental institutions, because of the way they substitute for state functions, and at the same time like a market, because of the way they compete with one another”

Paradigm Three: *Postmodern Version*

- “Social anthropologists criticize the concept of society as Euro-centric, something born of the Western cultural context (according to argument, Latin America and Eastern Europe are both culturally part of Europe)
 - Non-western societies experience or have potential to experience something similar to civil society, but individualism
 - Postmodernists, new religions, and ethnic movements that have also grown dramatically over the last decade are also part of global civil society
 - Global civil society cannot be just the ‘nice, good movements.’”
-

Source: Adapted from Kaldor (2003, pp. 589–590).

Global Civil Society and the Pandemic: Contestations and Collaborations

The coronavirus disease has caused tall expectations and severe strain on administrations around the globe. A lot has been written on the reoccurrence and revival of big government. To some extent overlooked amid the concentration on governments’ disaster responses, the coronavirus pandemic has sharpened and deepened the role of organized civil society acts. Civil society manifests as

coronavirus-related activism, as many civil society organizations (CSOs) have stepped in with emergency relief, and to assist with the management of the pandemic; many new civic groups emerged, especially at the local community level, while many CSOs repurposed themselves. Government administrations experienced severe strain, and civil society filled the gaps left by their chaotic responses to the emergency. For example, a report by CIVICUS (2020) notes “CSOs worked not only as frontline responders, but also as defenders of human rights during the pandemic, including the rights of vulnerable and excluded groups” (p. 2). Coronavirus-related activism has worked both as compensation for government shortcomings during the crisis and as partner to government initiative.

More understanding is required of society-level responses to the pandemic and the ways in which it is restructuring the connection between states and societies. Across numerous countries, the question that is being asked is: How far has the pandemic spurred innovative forms of civic activism?

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the world and its social and economic processes, triggering an international and unparalleled public health crisis, CSOs are responding by providing frontline assistance across the world. CSOs have vast experience of supporting public health services, immunization programs, social support, livelihood programs, and social liability. [Bhargava 2021](#)) confirms that CSOs have begun to complement governments’ COVID-19 responses, noting:

The Global Alliance for Vaccination and Immunization (Gavi) and the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX), the global initiative for procurement and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, also recognize the expertise of CSOs in public health and vaccination and have included them in their governing boards and operations. (p. 2)

Governments can generate a constructive environment for partnership with CSOs by appealing for their engagement in efforts in specific areas of their expertise, sharing evidence and data with them, and creating reciprocal dialogues between local establishments and CSOs.

Simultaneously, CSOs have been facing profound challenges that could damage their capacities to continue playing critical roles in the distribution of social good and services, promoting human rights, and defending the most vulnerable while preserving participatory democratic institutions and civic deliberation in the near future. Across diverse towns and states, residents came together through innovative voluntary links and mutual support societies; they raised financial support for emergency relief, awarded medical supplies and protective gear like personal protective equipment (PPE) kits and masks for overwhelmed hospitals, and distributed assistance to those who lacked social protection. Civic actors are also co-operating with several local level businesses to donate masks, medical paraphernalia, and meals, and to contribute to relief attempts in other ways: “In the face of these challenges, civil society adopted a can-do mindset, mounting a constructive response characterised by flexibility, creativity and innovation” (CIVICUS, 2020, p. 5).

While many governments offered funding and support to the vulnerable sections of society impacted by the dramatic slowdown of economic activity, structures and systems were often insufficient, leaving many individuals still fraught. States failed to take into consideration the needs of specific excluded clusters, such as the many individuals working in the informal sector of the economy who may not access government support measures that are often available to formal workers; together with undocumented migrants who are often not eligible for assistance, women, *inter alia*, were side-lined by sustenance arrangements that targeted males as heads of households. CSOs worked to compensate for these shortfalls by offering dynamic backing and evidence (CIVICUS, 2020).

Civil society actors perform vital roles in appraising and communicating to the public about the nature of coronavirus and the spread of the disease. Many resourceful local groups are springing up, with immediate neighbors organizing support for the vulnerable communities. CSOs have familiarity with and are trained in calamity responses; they are very frequently the primary and first responders in emergencies, and “are particularly important in ‘last mile’ delivery and in reaching the most excluded communities” (Vaughan & Hillier, 2019, p. 2).

Many organizations pitched in to supply oxygen during the deadly wave of the pandemic in April 2020:

In Tunisia, for example, more than 100,000 people joined a Facebook group bringing together volunteers to help fight the virus. The group now has 24 coordination centers across the country; its volunteers have raised money, collected medical supplies, disinfected public spaces, and worked with regional authorities to identify families with urgent financial needs. In Iran, a group of businesses and volunteers has delivered 70,000 respirators and other protective gear to Iranian health workers. Similarly, in Poland, new online platforms and social media groups are both matching people in need with community groups that can provide support and organizing to supply medical staff with equipment and food. Many more such local initiatives are springing up, with neighbors coming together to help the most vulnerable community members. (Brechenmacher, Carothers, & Youngs, 2020, p. 12)

Across various countries in Asia, the Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact took on the responsibility of providing food to indigenous poverty-stricken communities, much like India, where discrimination against indigenous people deepened during the pandemic, leading to some individuals being frightened of displacement and barred from using public services. For example, in the case of India:

hundreds of CSOs, like Goonj, Gram Bharati Samiti and Mahatma Gandhi Seva Ashram mobilised support to aid migrants, casual workers and slum dwellers by providing food, masks, sanitiser and menstrual hygiene products. Youth for Unity and Voluntary

Action provided food to healthcare workers, along with support to India's homeless people and slum dwellers. (CIVICUS, 2020, p. 8)

Faith institutions also played a significant part. Sikh communities globally tapped into the teaching and faith of Sikhism and started huge collective pantries to deliver essential support and food to the poor, together with support for elders and those powerless to fend for themselves; they also set up hotlines and websites for people to request help. During the deadly second wave of COVID-19 in India, they also distributed oxygen cylinders to the needy (CIVICUS, 2020, p. 12).

Political responses by some governments are also disrupting civil society globally; regular lockdown measures are upending their capability to unite, shape and advocate. Numerous CSOs have placed strategic and regular functions and roles on hold; many other NGOs and CSOs are scrambling to move their efforts online. More disturbingly, illiberal regimes are benefitting from the calamity, using it to stiffen their dogmatic grip by weakening the systems of checks and balances, imposing restrictions, and escalating state shadowing and scrutiny at a time when CSOs are powerless to fight back. While in some cases restrictive actions were balanced and defensible for the protection of lives, some administrations have used the crisis disingenuously to curb democratic freedoms and silence critical voices. Globally, the crisis has firmed up the prevailing partisan fault lines – in state and local areas, among opposite political camps, or between diverse religious and ethnic communities. Some fragile democracies and autocracies have suffered a serious lurch toward more centralized control and subjugation, with possible lasting ramifications. All these measures pose a substantial danger to civic activism. Restrictive rules devised during the pandemic are already squeezing civil society. The pandemic offered expedient shelter for governments to furthermore tilt the power equilibrium in their own favor.

The pandemic equally sharpens the requirement to shield democracy and presents new access points for national and global actors dedicated to its undertaking. The drastically changed political milieu calls on global organizations not only to recommit to shielding democracy, but also to regulate their approaches. The pandemic is also developing innovative arrangements of civil society mobilization. Civil society actors in several democratic and non-democratic countries are responding to the trials and difficulties posed by COVID-19; they are trying to fill the voids left by governments to distribute critical facilities, publicize evidence, and shelter the side-lined and deprived sections of society. In some cases, civil society actors are associating and collaborating with businesses and community establishments to support local groups struggling for financial support; they are also developing novel coalitions and unions to hold diffident or disobedient governments to account.

The recent urgency in civic society organizing themselves during the pandemic nonetheless provides an occasion to highlight the dynamic role of civil society, and its extensive support of vibrant and strong communities and democracy. Global supporters of civil society maximize their efforts to reinforce evolving local initiatives, to magnify civil society concerns in pandemic responses, and pitch their backing behind energies to preempt additional government limitations