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Voluntarism and civil society Ethiopia in Comparative Perspective¹

Abstract

This article examines the challenges to building a civil society based on strong voluntary associations in Ethiopia, a country like most others in sub-Saharan Africa where neither the social structures nor the institutional setting is congenial to the growth and sustenance of a civic tradition. Drawing on the practical experience of Oxfam-Canada's work with voluntary associations in Ethiopia, this article argues that international NGOs ready to facilitate the growth of local civic initiatives can make a difference even in circumstances where the political opportunity structure is only marginally open. Oxfam-Canada's program, which does not involve financial support to local partner organizations, shows that it is possible to be actively involved in social and economic development activities, but stretching the role to involvement in promoting civil and political liberties implies risks that neither the Canadians nor the Ethiopians consider worth taking at this point. The article ends by discussing the implications of this research for the study of voluntarism and civil society in Africa, arguing that these issues must be understood in the context of prevailing social structures and the nature of the state on the continent.

Keywords

Ethiopia, civil society, social processes, sociocultural change, political/social behaviour, interest group, work in an honorary capacity, social system, state, social structure, non-governmental organization, Oxfam-Canada, theory formation

Introduction

Are people ready to make a sacrifice for a cause beyond the boundaries of their primary social organization? If so, in what circumstances are they prepared to make such a sacrifice? These are key questions for any one interested in how civic participation and therefore a civil

1 We are grateful for comments on an earlier draft of this paper by Daniel Bekele, Raymond Genesse, and Ephrem Tadesse, all of Oxfam and two anonymous reviewers.

society may be built. It takes on special significance in African societies, which are hampered by widespread poverty, poor physical infrastructure, and can draw on only an emerging middle-class to take the lead on these issues. This is also a set of issues that goes beyond the walls of academe. A good deal of financial and technical support has been given to build civil society in African countries in the past ten years. It is important, therefore, that more research is conducted in this area. We believe that such research needs to bring to public attention not only a wider range of empirical evidence but also a better understanding of the historical and societal conditions that determine how far this kind of development assistance may work.

This paper is an attempt to address these needs. It builds on evaluative research conducted by Oxfam-Canada on its development partners in Ethiopia under the auspices of a Horn of Africa-wide capacity-building program. It also discusses the task of building civil society in Ethiopia in a comparative perspective, referring to the historical experience of Europe as well as contemporary efforts in some other African countries. The paper begins with a discussion aimed at both problematizing and clarifying its key concepts – civil society and voluntarism. It proceeds to place the discussion in its proper Ethiopian context before embarking on a presentation and analysis of the data. The final part makes comparative references to the challenges of building civil society in African countries and discusses some of the policy implications of the principal findings of this study.

Clarifying the Key Concepts

Civil Society

Civil society is one of the most frequently used concepts in the literature on democratization. It may also have earned the reputation of being one of the more abused such concepts. Unlike ‘democracy’ or ‘democratization’ – even ‘development’ – it has not been the subject of disaggregation for operational research uses. As such, civil society remains an umbrella concept that means a lot of different things to different people and, thus, in academic contexts means little, if anything. There are at least four problems with the uses of ‘civil society’.

The first is that civil society has historically been associated with the rise of democracy in both Europe and North America. This is not the place for a review of its philosophical origins (cf. Keane 1988, Cohen & Arato 1992, Hyden 1998, and Bermeo & Nord 2000), but it is important to emphasize that it is a product of a specific historical evolution associated with the Enlightenment and subsequent elements of modernization, notably urbanization, industrialization, and the rise of modern capitalism (cf. Putnam 1993, Gellner 1994, and Bermeo & Nord 2000). Civil society in these countries served the dual purpose of satisfying substantive needs while also changing the ‘rules of the political game’ in a participatory and democratic direction.

This takes us to a second problem – the neglect of the underlying structural conditions of civil society. This may be a particularly serious omission in the African context, where modernization has yet to take hold. More specifically, it can be argued that African societies lack the social contradictions that gave rise to civil society in places like Europe. Africa today is more like Czarist Russia in the 19th century, where efforts at voluntary organizing were seen as conspiratorial (Engelstein 2000). Although many attempts have been made to analyze Africa in terms of social class (cf., more recently, Markovitz 1998), there is a general understanding that societies on the continent tend to be divided primarily along ethnic (or possibly racial) rather than class or caste lines. Exceptions to this pattern exist in societies such as Ethiopia, northern Nigeria, Rwanda and Burundi, where marriage across kinship lines – although not necessarily across ethnic lines – was prohibited and caste-like stratifications emerged². In this respect, Ethiopia was not typical of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. A state – albeit pre-modern – was an influential factor in shaping social relations. Even in Ethiopia, however, politics was less dependent on organized interests and much more influenced by entrepreneurialism as practised by individual patrons (Lemarchand 1972, Medard 1982, Bratton & van de Walle 1997). Unlike the kind of ‘public sphere’ that followers of Jürgen Habermas emphasize (e.g. Calhoun 1992), African societies rely on a ‘communitarian’ public realm (Ekeh 1975).

This leads us to the third problem, which is the tendency to treat civil society as ‘arena’ without a specified content. Any organized activity between the family and the state becomes part of civil society, regardless of purpose or objective. In our view, it is necessary to distinguish between the organizations that make up a civil society. In African countries, the attention has naturally been paid primarily to non-governmental organizations. There are few, if any, social movements that have driven democratization as the case has been e.g. in Eastern Europe and Latin America. NGOs have many problems that limit their ability to foster the growth of a truly ‘civil’ society. They are either branches of international NGOs or they are funded from external sources. These features have important implications for their ability to be effective. Hadenius & Ugglå (1996), for example, point to the problems that such outside dependence causes for autonomous action. This weakness is exacerbated in the African context by the clientelist nature of politics, which preempts a formalized state-society relation, and instead encourages informalization of relations between officials, representing the state, and subjects, representing the society. As Bratton (1989) has noted, NGOs cannot rely on the law that gives them autonomy and freedom. They exist at the whim of political officials. It is difficult to form viable associations in this kind of social and political context. As Hadenius and Ugglå indicate, however, international NGOs with a commitment to helping local organiza-

2 Ephrem Tadesse has suggested that migration by members of the Oromo ethnic group had the effect of also disrupting the makeup of the Ethiopian ruling elite through marriages with members of the Amharic nobility. Such marriages tended to serve the dual purpose of coopting new groups into the empire and curbing competition for power. We agree that Ethiopia was a society where kinship organization was increasingly overshadowed by power relations focused on control of a centralizing state.

tions to grow, may have a positive role to play in terms of reducing the detrimental effects of donor dependence and clientelism.

Voluntarism

Voluntarism is a key aspect of civil society, because it is made up of organized activities in which individuals make a deliberate choice to participate. People may join organizations for a variety of reasons. Some do it for altruistic reasons, others do it for utilitarian purposes, i.e. they believe that they can get something out of it. Mancur Olson (1965), almost four decades ago, questioned the first set of reasons when he stated, contrary to conventional wisdom at the time, that America is a society of 'joiners', i.e. people who join associations without questioning why. There is no reason to speculate about motives here; only to recognize that people work together for a variety of reasons.

It is more important to make a distinction between relationships in primary and secondary types of organization. The former includes family and other similar entities into which a person is born. It provides an identity that cannot be changed. Relations in primary types of organization, therefore, are not voluntary in the sense that people have made a deliberate choice to be a member. As anthropologists have pointed out, rights and duties come from ascribed status (e.g. Hamer 1987:183). Secondary types of organization provide the scope for voluntarism, because they straddle the boundaries of primary types and involve a deliberate choice. Individuals do not get involved in just any organization. They do it with a purpose. For instance, a self-help association in rural Africa that spans across kinship boundaries is an expression of voluntary choice, accompanied by a set of rights and obligations. Each choice to participate in an organized activity is 'embedded' (Granovetter 1985) in the sense that it is never completely autonomous. The extent to which a choice is embedded, however, is likely to vary over time and space. Models of rational choice, derived from the Western experience of individualism, presuppose a complete autonomy, while models of communalism tend to assume the absolute opposite. Reality suggests that most individuals fall somewhere in-between. Neo-institutionalism in economics and political science recognizes the role that formal rules play in confining and defining choice (Williamson 1985, North 1990, Ostrom 1990).

It seems appropriate to assume that a level of formalism is inevitable in order to identify voluntarism. When a client attaches himself to a patron, it may be a conscious choice, but is it also voluntary? There is an implicit assumption that such a relationship is not voluntary because it is vertically constituted, i.e. one person is seen as having the resources and power to control the other. If at all it is a choice, it is so heavily constrained that it is better described as enforced upon the client. Voluntarism, therefore, is more likely to be associated with individuals making free choices among equals. People get together because they share an interest or perceive a common enemy. Because of the relatively low level of economic development in African countries, most of these 'common interests' tend to be confined in social space. It is primarily in urban settings that they may take on a wider reach. In the

countryside, they are typically limited to an individual community or a group thereof. In all these cases, the status of individuals is based on membership rather than kinship. The rationale behind these associations is often the threat from a real or perceived enemy. For instance, cooperative societies flourished in East African countries because of dominance by Indian traders (e.g. Nash, Dandler, and Hopkins 1976). They remained strong as long as the contractual nature of the organization was respected. Once leaders began to misappropriate funds and undermine contractual rights and obligations, these organizations began to falter (Hyden 1973). The history of associational development in Ethiopia is reminiscent of what happened in East Africa.

A historical perspective on civil society in Ethiopia

Ethiopia was a pre-modern empire with at least nominal control over a territory much larger than any other kingdom in Africa. As the country modernized in the mid-20th century, the imperial legacy was increasingly becoming a burden to more educated and urbanized groups in Ethiopia. Although the last emperor, Haile Selassie, embarked upon a cautious modernization of his country, his efforts could not keep pace with the social changes going on in society³. Ethiopian society became increasingly polarized. The regime was threatened by an attempted coup already in 1960, but lasted until 1974 when a severe drought and ensuing famine became an international embarrassment to Ethiopia and both civil and military forces in opposition to the imperial government decided to take action to remove it (for analysis of this critical period in Ethiopia history, see, e.g. Clapham 1969, Markakis 1974 and Levine 1974).

While voluntary associations played an important role in the last few years of the imperial regime, the military government that replaced it – the *dergue* – was dead set against any autonomous political activity. Drawing eventually on a strict Marxist-Leninist interpretation of history, the new military rulers under Mengistu Haile Mariam's chairmanship centralized power to the state and created its own set of mass organizations to which people had to belong. For example, in the countryside every male adult had to belong to a local peasant association. In the urban areas, the equivalence was the *kebele*, a quasi-civic entity used both for political mobilization and civil administration. Voluntarism was abandoned and civil society lost its meaning (Harbeson 1988).

The Mengistu regime was defeated first and foremost by a network of liberation movements that had come into existence in exile during the 1980s, the strongest being the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front. The EPRDF has retained the political administrative structures left behind by the *dergue* and adopted only minor modifications. Probably more in response to external than domestic pressures, the regime has cautiously

3 What happened in Ethiopia was the opposite to what happened at the same time in Iran, where the Shah was modernizing at a pace that was so fast that it created its own backlash.

opened the door to voluntary associations. It has remained suspicious of the motives of many of these newly formed associations, however, and associational life in Ethiopia remains feeble.

The three regime periods discussed briefly above form a convenient way of also dividing up the history of civil society in Ethiopia. They all produced very different outcomes, yet they shared much in common. The last couple of decades of imperial rule produced a number of associations that reflected the growing importance of professional and commercial interests in society. Students and lawyers were among the first to organize, but as international donor interest in agricultural development was incorporated into the Emperor's national development strategy, farmers' cooperatives and local development associations also became increasingly important. A good case in point is the Gurage People's Self-Help Development Organization. The important thing about these years is that they were characterized by optimism. Associations grew in response to an accelerating dynamic in society. The patriarchal, benevolent, but also privileged character of the leadership served as a focal point of organized activity, some of it in support of the regime, but most of it against it. The religious community found itself increasingly divided over its role in society. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) – by far the largest – remained supportive of the imperial regime, while both Protestant groups like the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesu (EECMY), and the Islamic community were more split in their orientation toward the regime.

With few exceptions like the *Iddirs* and other types of local self-help associations, the years of Marxist-Leninist rule under Mengistu forced any voluntary activity outside the borders of the country. A good number of relief and development associations, connected to the political groups in exile, were established. They were all voluntary in the sense of relying on contributions from individual Ethiopians in exile, but they were quasi-political and so closely tied to the political agenda of specific groups in the diaspora that their autonomy was rather limited. Most were simply 'fronts' for the political organizations. The latter could not receive development aid directly from American and European donors because they were engaged in a military-political struggle to topple the regime in Addis Ababa. The best example is the Relief Society of Tigray, which was linked very closely to the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front. Another case in point is the Oromo Relief Association, the relief arm of the Oromo Liberation Front. Rather than becoming involved in strengthening civil society, these associations tied their destiny to the political organizations to which they had been linked since the days in exile.

The past ten years have witnessed the growth of a third generation of associations that are cautiously addressing the country's development needs without necessarily challenging the political establishment. The latter has demonstrated a strong commitment to national development, but it has preferred to retain control of the public agenda at the expense of other actors. Nonetheless, there has been a growing space for voluntary initiatives by Ethiopians, in some instances working together with international NGOs. The impetus for action has often been the economic difficulties that people face both in rural and urban areas as

well as health problems, notably HIV/AIDS and malaria. Compared to the 1960s, the challenges are much greater today. Although there is some optimism, many of the initiatives come more out of despair than out of the optimism that characterized voluntary action some four decades ago. The main features of each period are summarized below:

Table 1. The emergence of associational life in Ethiopia from 1950 to 2000

	1950-74 (Haile Selassie)	1974-91 (Mengistu)	1991-2002 (EPRDF)
Main types of organization	Professional, Academic, Farmers, Self-Help	Relief and development associations formed in exile	Economic and social development associations
Organizational climate	Optimistic	Militant	Cautious
Nature of organizational structure	Democratic and functioning	Autocratic and disciplinary	Democratic and tentative

As a prelude to our analysis of the Oxfam-Canada experience of working with voluntary associations in Ethiopia, it is necessary to say a little more about the current state of efforts to rebuild civil society in that country.

Structural conditions

The challenge of building civil society is determined by a combination of factors. Drawing on the literature on social movements (e.g. Tarrow 1998), there are at least three variables of importance: (1) political opportunity structure, (2) resource mobilization, and (3) identity. The first refers to the opportunities that exist within a polity to successfully pursue voluntary initiatives, the second to the extent to which an initiative can raise resources, both material and moral, for its cause, and the third to how strongly members identify with their organization.

The political opportunity structure in Ethiopia, on a scale from open to closed, must be labeled 'ambiguous'. The legal regime guiding associational life in Ethiopia is still emerging. Formally speaking, the new Federal Constitution guarantees freedom of association, although in practice this is less certain. For operational purposes, all NGOs, professional associations, and religious organizations – other than the Ethiopian Orthodox Church – are registered under the Civil Code of Ethiopia, which dates back to 1960, and the Associations Registration Regulation No 321 of 1966. There has been some controversy whether the language of the Civil Code is applicable also to today's NGOs, especially those with an exter-

nal link. One group has been lobbying for a new piece of legislation that is more comprehensive and up-to-date. NGOs have been allowed to have an input into this process, but consultations are still ongoing.

The ruling EPRDF, through the various branches of the state, keeps a close eye on what is going on in society. There have been several incidents of arrests of outspoken individuals⁴. Organizations have understandably responded with caution, but even so at least one association, Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association, has suffered suspension for reasons other than financial mismanagement. The current climate among civil society-based organizations is that antagonizing the ruling establishment is associated with more costs than benefits.

Resource mobilization is a big challenge in a poor country like Ethiopia. This is not to deny the significance of local self-help associations that exist at community level throughout the country. They are important in helping community members care for specific tasks, such as planting or harvesting, weddings and funerals. Even if we were to accept that these organizations form part of civil society because they build on an element of voluntarism that transcends the boundaries of primary organization, their contribution to building civil society is minimal, because it is focused on a very particular local task or function (see, e.g. Hallpike 1972, Hamer 1987)⁵. One could even argue that because these activities take up so much time, today they have little, if any, left for mobilizing resources for other tasks that transcend the boundaries of their community. The added pressure brought on the rural households by the government-controlled peasant associations means that resources are being absorbed for purposes other than building civil society.

While resource mobilization for building voluntary associations in the countryside, therefore, is highly constrained, opportunities do exist in the urban areas. It is no coincidence that the main contributors to building civil society in Ethiopia are urban-based. This is where the supplementary resources for voluntary action are most readily available. The richer strata may be ready to provide donations and by virtue of education and experience take on leadership roles. Poorer segments, because of the hardship they encounter and the absence of the support structure they can find in the rural communities, are sometimes ready to offer their moral, maybe even material, support.

Resource mobilization in African countries today, however, is not confined to domestic sources only. In fact, the predominant source is external. It takes two forms. One is direct financing by a donor agency. The other is a partnership that involves both financial and technical assistance by an international NGO. As of 2002, there were a total of 1120 NGOs

4 For instance, Dr Taye Woldeesemaiet, Secretary General of Ethiopian Teachers' Association, Dr Berhanu Nega, President of the Ethiopian Economics Association as well as Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, Chairman of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council were all jailed for considerable time before being released. Dr Taye was in prison for as long as seven years before being released.

5 As the case of Gurage People's Self-Help Development Organizations indicates, organized self-help groups were more dynamic in the 1960s when the political opportunity structure was more open. In some cases they grew to become prominent at national level.

registered in the country⁶. Of these, 419 were classified as ‘development oriented’ and registered with the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC). Of these 291 were local and 128 international NGOs. The NGO community was rendering services to approximately 15 per cent of the total population at a value of 1 Billion Birr (CRDA News 2002:8).

Associational life

Civil society does not exist in a vacuum. It is interactive with the state as well as external actors. Its associational members, therefore, will adopt strategies that reflect this reality. Our hypothesis is that strategies will vary according to whether the state is strong or weak, whether its philosophy is needs- or rights oriented. The state may be ready to share the development burden with voluntary associations, but it reacts negatively if the latter begin to speak in terms of rights to public goods⁷. Civil society is left free as long as it doesn’t challenge the rules set for political control by the state. Civil society in Ethiopia is cowed in comparison with what is found in other parts of the world, e.g. Europe and the Americas. Another way of putting it is to suggest that civil society is at a lower level of development. It is possible to think of a scale along which associations grow and civil society develops. At the lower end, voluntary action is confined to matters that are less politically controversial or challenging than at the upper ends of the scale. We suggest that this scale may be arranged along a scale, which implies that socio-economic issues dominate at the lower end, while civil-political ones do at the upper end, as suggested in Figure 1. The assumption underlying this scale is that dealing with socio-economic issues – in Ethiopia relief and development – is important but in itself not as important in terms of empowerment. The real test of growth lies at the upper end of the scale where matters are more political, because they imply making demands of government and taking issue with public officials. The higher up the scale, therefore, the stronger the associations and the more vibrant civil society.

6 Each NGO is registered with the Ministry of Justice. As part of the contract to operate in Ethiopia, these organizations must also sign a contract to work with a particular line ministry or government agency.

7 Harshness is not a sign of a ‘strong’ state. It is more often a sign of the opposite. Thus, in the Ethiopian case, many observers would label the state ‘intimidating’ or ‘harsh’. Our position is that such qualities are more associated with a weak state that suffers from a lack of both capacity and legitimacy.

Figure 1. A development scale for voluntary action and civil society⁸

Areas of concern	Civil society	Voluntary associations	Scale
Civil & political matters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pluralism • Free public fora • Representativeness • Coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tolerance of different views within organization • Internal debates • Transparency • Accountability 	High
Social & economic matters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring policy delivery • Making policy demands • Mobilizing constituency interests • Policy identification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivering on promise • Advocating policy • Mobilizing member support • Problem identification 	middle
			low

We are not suggesting that this provides a linear scale for action. It is possible to make interventions at different levels, but we are concerned that the following aspects are being considered. The first is that the risks for a particular actor increase the higher up the scale any activity is attempted. It is easier to start at the lower end of the scale, because working at

⁸ This figure is adjusted from earlier efforts by Harry Blair (2001).

that level is associated with fewer risks for the individual association or civil society at large. Confining work to this point is generally interpreted by the state as complementary and part of nation-building or national development. If an individual association or civil society itself is seen as lobbying for changes in the way the state or society operates, the challenge increases and with it the risks. The second point is that the lower end of the scale deals with how effective an association or civil society is in delivering substantive goods, while the upper end deals with reaching influence and power at the macro level. There is ideally no contradiction between these objectives, but in most practical situations, there is. For example, donors, in the interest of building civil society, push individual associations to work at the macro level on the assumption that this is where influence is being exercised. Voluntary associations, however, must have a strong constituency and enjoy the credibility of individual members before they can meaningfully embark on the more contested tasks at the upper end of the scale. As Korten (1990) has argued and Esman and Uphoff (1984) have repeated, an organization must be allowed to prove its effectiveness before it gets involved in improving efficiency or embarking on expansion. So there is some theoretical logic behind thinking of the lower end of the scale as the natural starting-point for building civil society and strengthening voluntary associations.

The Oxfam-Canada experience

Oxfam-Canada is one of the international NGOs that have worked on building capacity in the voluntary sector in Ethiopia in the past six years. We are reporting here on the specifics of a special action-research initiative, involving a total of 28 partner-organizations in Ethiopia during the period from 1999 to 2002.⁹ All of them are member organizations based on voluntarism. On this account, they were invited to participate in this project, which was designed to provide recognition to their work and to stimulate networking and the articulation of a discourse on voluntarism in Ethiopia. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the membership in the network are involved with education or health issues. Only two focus on environmental issues. Examples of organizations in the network include the Anti-Malaria Association, Voluntary Council of Handicapped Children and Adults, Family Guidance Association of Ethiopia, Dawn of Hope-Ethiopia, and Mekrez Reading Association.

The interesting thing about this special initiative is that the sponsoring organization was *not* providing financial support to these 28 organizations. The relationship was based on the idea of promoting the concept of voluntarism and associational autonomy, not the least toward external resource providers. Especially encouraging for the initiative was that the Addis Ababa Chamber of Commerce participated actively in several activities organized by Oxfam-Canada. One important contribution it made was to establish a fund for a "Volunteer-of-the-Year" award. Several workshops were held in Ethiopia and other places in the Horn to

9 Although Oxfam-Canada is active in four countries in the Horn (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan), this initiative was implemented in Ethiopia only.

promote local resource mobilization among voluntary associations in the Horn at large. Radio and television programs were produced for local channels and inspired people to contribute voluntarily to some of the activities carried out by these associations. By 2002, the initiative had resulted in the establishment of the Ethiopian Association of Voluntary Services (EAVOS), bringing the 28 local associations together.

An evaluation of their performance in the first three years indicates that most have been successful in such areas as addressing specific local needs, overcoming obstacles to women's participation, mobilizing resources, and stimulating interaction with other NGOs. Some claim to have developed a good working relationship with public governing institutions, but for many it remains a challenge to overcome a lack of trust among local communities and local authorities. Few reported success in promoting a culture of peace, justice, and democracy, which was used as a measure of how much the organization contributed to a more civic culture in society. In short, the higher up the scale that organizations pitch their aspirations, the greater are the challenges – and obstacles – that they encounter. As one would expect, the overall performance varied from one organization to another. According to Oxfam's own evaluation of the network members, close to half were 'high' performers, with another 35 per cent coming in as 'medium' performers. Only 10 per cent were really performing poorly ('low'), as indicated below:

Table 2. Overall performance in institutionalizing voluntarism and raising local support

Performance level	Social development organizations	Environmental organizations
High	40 % (11)	3.5% (1)
Medium	32 (9)	3.5 (1)
Low	10 (3)	-
No information	10 (3)	-

With regard to more specific organizational issues, the evaluation found a tendency for founders to remain prominent – and dominant. One reason is that the cause of the organization tends to be so closely associated with the activist who started it. Finding a replacement ready to devote the same amount of energy to the cause and the organization is difficult. Relying on paid staff as an alternative is typically beyond the financial capacity of these organizations.

One of the most encouraging findings of the evaluation was that some of the organizations used their locally raised resources as a matching contribution in order to get external funding. This approach was much appreciated in donor circles where program officers believed that such an arrangement enhanced the prospect for institutional sustainability.

Other indicators of success included policy advocacy, especially by the organizations working on health issues. Policy advocacy influenced national policy with regard to AIDS and malaria. There is also evidence to suggest that this advocacy led to more funding to fight these diseases. Some of the activities carried out by these groups became models for similar efforts elsewhere. Particularly notable was the “Keep Addis Ababa Beautiful” project, which was subsequently replicated in other towns around the country. Among the more notable achievements were also those organizations that lobbied local authorities for land and were granted facilities and permission to develop income-generating activities.

Even if we account for the possibility that respondents may have exaggerated their achievements, it is clear that the Oxfam-Canada initiative has created a momentum among local voluntary associations that did not exist before. To be sure, the activities of the organizations participating in the program are still at the lower end of the performance scale (see Figure 1), but the fact that their contribution to local development was achieved without any financial incentives or contributions by Oxfam-Canada suggests that it is a sustainable effort. So what are the reasons for its relative success?

We believe that three factors are of special importance: (1) individual activism, (2) facilitation methods, and (3) trust.

It is important to recognize the “heroes” of this program: the individuals who started organizations to cope with the issues facing them. They are similar to individual activists elsewhere in the world. They are well endowed with personal resources that count: confidence, a sense of autonomy, often boasted by wealth or education. It would be wrong, however, to assume that they would have acted had they not perceived an opening in the political opportunity structure in Ethiopia. As suggested above, this opening has not been very big and most people have remained cautious for fear of being reprimanded by the government. Yet, within what is essentially the “development realm”, these activists have seized the opportunity to run their own organized activities to help others.

Oxfam worldwide has a rich experience of working with local NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs). Its Canadian branch has been in the forefront of using this experience in the Horn of Africa. Its methodology of facilitation builds on the premise that others can do things on their own, if only provided with the right stimulus and “moral support”. This amounts to creating an enabling environment, not necessarily at the level of civil society itself, but for individuals working within voluntary associations. Instead of preempting the opportunity for local activists to succeed, Oxfam-Canada has done its best to support it through dialogue and activities that boost the confidence of individuals to act in public and relate to officials in government. It has stressed the importance of a “soft” approach to the authorities, involving dialogue rather than confrontation. This way of conducting business has not only been favored by the local stakeholders, but it has also helped the initiative to grow and sustain itself.

The third factor of importance here is the social trust that has evolved between Oxfam-Canada staff and their Ethiopian counterparts in the voluntary sector. This is in part a

result of inter-personal skills on part of the former – which includes both Canadians and Ethiopians – in part also a consequence of Oxfam’s strategy of not pushing an agenda of its own. Many international NGOs are perceived as pushing their own interests and tend to rely on their ability to provide funding. Local participants or stakeholders easily become suspicious of such organizations. Avoiding such suspicions is not easy and Oxfam-Canada has succeeded where many others have failed in building the necessary trust that enhances the development of a program initiative. The fact that Oxfam also regularly brought all its participants in the program together for dialogue and stock-taking helped generate trust not just between them and the local participants, but also among the latter. The program created a community of associations with the capacity to encourage others to help build a civil society.

The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective

The Ethiopian case study suggests that voluntarism can make a difference to development but that building civil society is also influenced by both structural and institutional factors. Human choice and agency are important, but they are constituted by social structures as well as institutional variables such as freedom of association. In this concluding section, we will take a comparative look at the role that social structures and institutions play in shaping the emergence of civil society

Social Structures

Voluntary associations have historically always developed in response to specific needs. Civil society differs in time and space depending on the particular needs that people articulate and act upon. In 19th century Europe, associational life reflected the emerging social stratification and class contradictions of industrial and capitalist society. The notion of a ‘public sphere’ in which people can freely engage in discourse was, as Habermas (1989) pointed out, a product of the rise of a bourgeoisie. Other classes, while opposed to the latter, ensured that it became not just a privilege of the wealthy and educated few. It is this historical experience that has shaped our current conception of civil society. The latter comes loaded with a normative baggage that is often treated as if it has no particular anchor.

The idea that this notion of civil society travels across national boundaries may make sense in the Americas, which were settled by emigrants from Europe. Even though the social and economic circumstances in the New World differed, they carried with them a cultural legacy that could be used to write constitutions and form polities. Even though the historical experience of Latin American countries has been checkered, it has centered on a political agenda that has very much in common with the tradition of southern – if not western – Europe. It is no coincidence, therefore, that much of the literature on associational life and

civil society travels quite easily across the Atlantic (cf. e.g., Escobar & Alvarez 1992; Tarrow 1998).

The history of Asia and Africa is different. It is not that social stratification is totally absent. That is especially true in Asian societies, which have long been stratified by class or caste. It is rather that European notions of organizing state-society relations have been less influential there. The presence of strong civilizations in Asia – Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism and Islam – laid the foundation for alternative arrangements, in which the state came to operate in the context of a moral economy characterized by duties to the citizenry. It is no coincidence that Asia provides the best ground for the evolution of a ‘development state’, a scenario in which it has served as the ‘engine’ of development, both social and economic. Associational life in Asian countries reflects this benevolent role of the state. It functions not in opposition to the state, but as a complement to it. Civil society, therefore, is a collaborative partner in development rather than antagonist in the political process.

Efforts to establish a development state in post-independence Africa have failed. The post-colonial state, i.e. the revamped machinery inherited from the colonial powers, tried to do what countries in Asia have done. The double tragedy is that not only did the state in Africa fail to produce public goods but by monopolizing the development tasks, it also preempted the opportunities for free associations to function. Associational life in post-independence Africa was killed. Efforts to re-establish it since 1990 have taken place in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion between officials and citizens. Because of the past failures of the state in development, extra efforts have been made to foster the growth of local development associations.

Because Ethiopia was never colonized, its own experience differs a bit from other African countries. It was the only country in Africa with a long imperial tradition, i.e. of a state that continued to expand its territorial control over neighboring societies. Even though both Orthodox Christianity and Islam may have been conservative forces, they provided a stable institutional framework, similarly to what could be found in Asian societies. This framework also allowed the emergence of an aristocracy with its own ‘high culture’. The latter had begun to lay the same foundation for an indigenously driven mode of development as in Asia. In the end, however, this legacy was too weak to withstand the pressures of modernization that followed from Ethiopia’s increasing interaction with Western countries. This leaves Ethiopia as a case somewhere in-between the Asian, European, and other African examples. It retains a pride in its own historical past. The state arrogates to itself the role as prime engine of development. Yet, in spite of its attempt to create an ethnically divided federation, the civic notions that emerge in opposition to an autocratic type of rule under modernizing conditions are still present. The question is whether they would grow stronger if confined to the sub-national level.

The institutional setup

Social structures set the stage for political action, but they are not independent of human action. They are continuously modified, as Giddens (1984) and others after him have emphasized. The extent to which autonomous organized action changes the basic structures of society varies from place to place. Giddens himself suggests that the scope for autonomous action increases with level of modernity. Because the latter implies 'disembeddedness', i.e. freedom to act with disregard to communitarian values, the prospect for social change increases in an exponential manner with modernization.

The ultimate end of this process in the evolutionary perspective of modernization theory is the creation of a rational-legal political order, in which a market economy can function in a reliable manner. We think that the lessons of development indicate that in the long run it is not so much whether the state is 'strong' or 'weak' that matters, but rather whether it is 'firm' or 'soft'. A state is firm if it is free from corruption and other informal means of exercising influence. It is soft if it is extensively influenced by such activities.

Civil society flourishes in a country that has a firm state, because the attitude of officialdom itself encourages organized counter-action. The 'faceless' bureaucrat cannot be bribed or seduced by other personalized influences. The only way to deal with him is autonomously organized action; hence, the growth of associational life and a civil society built around civic values. The evolution of a 'firm' state is at least in part a product of social and economic development, but one of the more interesting puzzles in the contemporary context is how far the institutional setup in a country can be 'firmed up' as a shortcut to progress. Although Asian countries are not free from corruption or the influences we associate with a soft state, they have generally been more successful than countries in Africa and Latin America in overcoming the problems associated with such type of a state.

The relative success of the 'development state' in the Asian context may be attributed to this difference. As we suggested above, this had led voluntary associations to define their own role as complementary rather than confrontational in relation to the state. To the extent that the latter participate in the policy process, they do so without challenging the right of the state to have the last word on how a given policy should be formulated and implemented. This relatively positive respect for officialdom does not exist in African countries, including Ethiopia. Past failures of the state to deliver development and a common sense among people in many countries, that officials are more interested in their own personal rather than the public interest, mean that voluntary action takes place because there is no other alternative. If government officials are jealous of such initiatives or possibly even fear them, they will be either ignored or outright stifled. In short, state and civil society do not find it easy to engage in positive collaboration in African countries. We found in interviews with representatives of the voluntary associations in Ethiopia that they often were worried about what government officials would do if they were very successful and their initiative becomes publicly visible. Similarly, government officials tended to look upon development as the sole responsibility of the state. In short, voluntary associations in Ethiopia have been extremely reluctant at this

point to engage in pursuing an agenda that implies an advocacy of civil-political liberties. They have remained focused on socio-economic development issues.

By focusing on development Oxfam-Canada has avoided an overtly political role, yet it can be argued that it has accomplished a highly political goal: helping to bring state and civil society together in more constructive relationships. It shows, as in the Asian cases, that development provides a rewarding context for building or strengthening civil society. Ethiopia, like other African countries, still have a long way to go to reach the level of cooperation and complementarity between state and civil society that can be found in Asia. Efforts to build civil society will be best pursued by focusing on the activities that are associated with the lower end of the scale of civil society measures. Our study suggests that working on getting socio-economic issues addressed first provides a more effective basis for turning to the civil-political issues associated with state-civil society relations. In Ethiopia, as in other African countries, this is the two-pronged approach that seems politically most effective at this point in time.

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Herausforderungen zur Bildung einer Zivilgesellschaft basierend auf starken, freiwilligen gemeinnützigen Vereinigungen in Äthiopien, einem Land wie viele andere im subsaharischen Afrika, wo weder die sozialen Strukturen noch die institutionellen Gegebenheiten das Wachstum und den Fortbestand einer zivilen Tradition begünstigen. Aufbauend auf der praktischen Erfahrung der Arbeit von Oxfam-Kanada mit Freiwilligen-Organisationen in Äthiopien wird argumentiert, dass internationale NGOs, die bereit sind, das Wachstum ziviler Initiativen zu unterstützen, Veränderungen bewirken können, sogar dann, wenn das politische System nur begrenzt geöffnet ist. Das Programm von Oxfam-Kanada, welches keine finanzielle Unterstützung lokaler Partner-Organisationen einschließt, zeigt, dass es zwar möglich ist, in Bereichen sozialer und wirtschaftlicher Entwicklung aktiv zu sein, die Ausweitung des Engagements auf die Propagierung ziviler und politischer Freiheiten aber auch ein Risiko beinhaltet, welches weder die Kanadier noch die Äthiopier zu diesem Zeitpunkt einzugehen bereit sind. Abschließend wird diskutiert, welche Auswirkungen diese Studie auf die Erforschung von ehrenamtlichem Engagement und Zivilgesellschaft in Afrika hat, und dargelegt, dass diese Fragen im Zusammenhang mit den vorherrschenden sozialen Strukturen und der Beschaffenheit des Staates auf dem Kontinent gesehen werden müssen.

Schlagwörter

Äthiopien, Zivilgesellschaft, Gesellschaftliche Prozesse, Sozio-kultureller Wandel, Politisches Verhalten/Gesellschaftliches Verhalten, Interessengruppe, Ehrenamtliche Tätigkeit, Gesellschaftssystem, Staat, Sozialstruktur, Nichtregierungsorganisation, Oxfam-Canada, Theoriebildung

Résumé

Le présent article étudie les défis de la mise en place en Ethiopie d'une société civile fondée sur de fortes organisations bénévoles. L'Ethiopie est un pays comme beaucoup d'autres en Afrique subsaharienne, où ni les structures sociales ni les institutions ne favorisent la croissance et le maintien d'une tradition civile. L'auteur en s'appuyant sur l'expérience pratique d'Oxfam-Canada avec des organisations bénévoles en Ethiopie défend l'idée que les ONG internationales qui sont prêtes à soutenir le développement des initiatives civiles peuvent produire des changements même si le système politique n'a qu'une ouverture limitée. Le programme d'Oxfam-Canada qui ne comprend pas d'aides financières aux organisations partenaires locales montre que s'il est possible d'être actif dans les domaines du développement social et économique, l'extension de l'engagement en faveur des libertés civiles et politiques comporte un risque que jusqu'à présent ni les Canadiens, ni les Ethiopiens ne sont prêts à encourir. En conclusion, l'auteur s'interroge sur l'incidence de cette étude sur la recherche sur le bénévolat et la société civile en Afrique et conclut que ces questions sont à aborder en relation avec les structures sociales préexistantes et la nature de l'État sur le continent.

Mots-clé

Ethiopie, société civile, processus sociaux, changement socio-culturel, comportement politique/social, groupe d'intérêt, bénévolat, système social, État, structure sociale, organisation non-gouvernementale, Oxfam-Canada, formation de théorie

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