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Southeast Asia is a region, which had been primarily examined in matters of economic transformation. Now there is a growing interest in civil society. Civil society is often seen as to play a central role in democratisation processes by political scientists. Sociologists point out the function of integration. Yet, both fields of academia share an American or European perspective of the discourse on civil society. Normative approaches dominate the discourses. Visions of how civil society should look like come to the fore. At the same time an empiric approach is lacking, which analyses the reality of civil society in the particular countries and regions.

Discourses about Civil Society

The debates about civil society are mainly affected by only two different ideologies (Klein 2001). There is a tension between a *liberal-democratic* vision of free citizens and a vision of citizens who are integrated in a political society. The first idea belongs to the United States, whereas the later represents Western European *republican* thinking. The liberal way of thinking emphasizes the segregation of state and society. Civil society is regarded as to be independent from the state. From the perspective of a *republican* mindset, civil society and the state are connected by institutions like voluntary associations, organizations, cooperations or other forms of networking.

It has to be pointed out that discussions about Western societies dominate the debates. Alexis de Tocqueville, who explained the functioning of America's democracy at the end of the 19th century with the willingness of the American citizens to get involved in public associations. This concept is a very popular representation of the idea of civil society. One of his substantial arguments is that civic associations represent a school of democracy. Organizations and various kinds of groups, which are part of civil society, are considered to become important in transforming private individuals into citizens. By practicing in voluntary organizations, people adopt essential democratic values.

Academic work on civil society frequently contains research on social capital, the third sector or civic engagement in the Western world. But an "Asian" perspective should be integrated in the international discourse, too. American or European criterions for civil society do not apply for understanding civil society movements in Asia. Therefore a common perception is the non-existence of civil society structures in most Asian countries. To comprehend civic organizations in this region we have to be sensitive in respect of the adequate approach to civil society as a topic.

Approaches to Civil Society

The Topographical Approach

Basically there are two conceptions of civil society: First, civil society is defined as a specific social realm apart from the market and the state. This definition clearly separates the three spheres of society: market, state and civil society. It is a widely used concept, which can be called the *topographical approach*.

But while the spheres of market and state are relatively easy to describe and analytically distinct, the attempt of assigning certain fields of societal action to the third sphere and, subsequently, to demarcate it against the other two encounters greater difficulties. While the market sphere incorporates companies and business organizations with profit orientation, the state sphere incorporates government, bureaucratic organizations related to the state, and political parties, there is no such clear distinction in the sphere of civil society. This explains why the concept of civil society in the topographic tradition often serves as a *residual category* only – civil society is what is left over from society after subtracting the spheres of the market and the state. In this concept, only numeric and statistical facts matter and from a sociological point of view, there is nothing but a counting of Non-Governmental Organizations and Associations.

It is noteworthy that this concept of civil society is US- and Eurocentric as it derives from a typical western pluralistic system. Moreover, within the topographic approach it is common practice to solely obtain an organizational perspective, thus restraining the concept of civil society to the existence of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs).

The theory of civil society is mostly tested in Western countries with regard to an analytical approach to organization. In doing so, certain associations and civil society developments in Southeast Asia are out of sight. For example in Vietnam, state-mobilized or political organizations do not fit into any definition of civil soci-

ety which stresses autonomy from the state. NGOs are emerging slowly. But this must not by all means be interpreted negative. Because the "mediating groups" or "quasi-civil-organizations" bear civic impacts, which are disregarded by an examination from a mere organizational point of view. In some cases mass-organizations provide political participation and scope for engagement.

More often only NGOs are presumed to represent the institutional core of civil society. In most Western academic publications or for example in reports of the World Bank the mere number of national or international Non-Governmental Organizations is serving as an indicator for civic structures in the designated countries. But this remains a typically Western point of view, which largely relies on the civil society definition of sociologist Juergen Habermas. He points out spontaneously formed voluntary associations, which attend to societal problems and build civil society. Consequentially, other forms of involvement and ways of conduct are neglected. A narrow view, focused on NGOs only, is not sensitive enough to include cultural aspects and national characteristics. Hence civic potential from non-recognized actors would remain hidden from the observer following the method of *topographical approach*.

The dominance of an approach characterized by highly normative ideas does sometimes lead to skepticism in reference to the establishment of NGOs according to Western standards (Mutz/Klump 2002, 2005). For example in Vietnam and Laos people stress their own Asian concept of civil society and normally do not look favorably upon organizations initiated by the Western world. In Thailand there is a lively discussion about how far Non-Governmental Organizations are controlled by foreign countries, which pursuit their own economic interests instead of Thai peoples' concerns.

In order to be able to set off sustainable development cooperation projects in countries of the CLMV-Region (named after Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar/Burma and Vietnam) plus Thailand (altogether called Mekong Region), it is important to advance the promotion of civic initiatives by using a different approach to civil society.

The Action Oriented Approach

The second approach conceives civil society of the notion of civic structures and civic action – even of a civic habit or attitude. In other words, this approach changes the perspective on civil society from simply viewing the civil society sphere to viewing civic action, in which civil society actors are involved. We call this approach the *action-orientated approach* towards civil society. From this point of view civic structures and civic action may well be enclosed in all areas, spheres, and subfields of society. It is less about a separation of a civil society sphere than about typical civic action, preconditions and consequences.

For instance, there are companies adhering to the nonprofit principle as well as to social aims – this would rep-

resent an example of civic involvement in the realm of the market sphere. Especially the civil society-oriented structures of economic associations, as co-operatives or co-op networks, are of similar relevance as party political structures for a civic state. An action oriented approach questions how civic action is realized in different social contexts.

Concepts of Civil Society have to be Culturally Sensitive

It is important to understand that civil society is bound to the context of a region or a country. In Southeast Asia, civic structures, which advance processes of social integration, existed at all times. It concerns traditional and still intact institutions of civil society, which are normally not noticed by development policy. Having diminished the "Western" organizational perspective, different cultural aspects – such as specific traditional practices – will become visible, when we look at civil society as a structured way of acting. These traditional forms are unique in local societies in Southeast Asia and often completely inconsistent with modern conceptions of civil societies. This inconsistency can make development aid from western organizations, which aims at building civil society more difficult.

Furthermore there is interdependency between market, social processes and civil society, which also have to be borne in mind. Many Asian countries are facing a dramatic transformation process. The transformation countries are undergoing a change which affects diverse sectors of society at the same time. Therefore it is not only political participation we have to deal with but capacious processes of economic and social integration, too, when we are talking about civil society.

In Vietnam crucial reforms, aimed at the transformation of the planned economy into a market economy, have been implemented in 1986. From an economic perspective, Cambodia has an open market; the government of Laos practices a concept of New Economic Mechanism (NEM). Even in Myanmar/Burma there is a precautious opening towards the world market.

In addition to economic reforms, there are also political changes in the Southeast Asian area, which head in different directions in the particular countries. Democracy is endeavored in Cambodia since 1991, Laos established a communist one-party system after the civil war in 1975, Myanmar/Burma has undergone a military coup in 1988, and since the war against the United States the Communist Party runs the country in Vietnam. These processes of change do have severe consequences for the social structures of the CLMV-Region (World Bank 2001; UNDP 2002; Schönherr 2003; Thompson 2003; Lee 2003). Compared to the preceding processes of modernization in Europe, the development in the countries of Southeast Asia is evolving more rapidly and under completely different cultural preconditions.

Regarding the social relations within Vietnamese society for instance, there is a relationship which is characterized by a certain tension between community oriented interests and individual interests. But solidarity and individuality are not mutually exclusive. Modern structures and lifestyles are integrated into a framework of traditional practices.

Empirical data show that different types of associations and networks are merging. Traditional family and kinship structures, which social capital theory calls "bonding" relationships, are providing a net of social security. It is about connecting to those people similar to oneself. Social relationships with people different from oneself, but who are acting in the same social field, are called "bridging" associations. These forms of civic structures correspond to modern lifestyles. Traditional and other informalized practices (Liebert/Lauth 1999) are "soft" factors in relation to the economic development of a country. Amartya Sen points out

> that markets need other institutions to function well (...): a system of shared values, related to trust, reliability, and basic business ethics which have made the success of capitalism possible. (Sen 2001: 3ff.)

With regard to the development of civil society social capital is very important (Putnam 1993).

Some actors have created ways to bridge traditional and modern ways of acting; one can even observe that modern organizations reanimate old traditional practices. In order to cultivate a maximum potential in the development of civil societies, creative mechanisms of linking old and new forms of civic involvement have to be found.

There can be given some examples for informalized or only little formalized patterns of action. One can find traditional practices in all societal fields, however predominantly in religious institutions, for example Buddhist communities. Of course, one must not deny that the importance of religious institutions is sometimes over-interpreted and idealized, and the danger of being misused or instrumentalized is always inherent. But Buddhism indeed has an integrating function in the societies of the Mekong Region and is connected with economic action. Particularly in Cambodia, religion has some relevance in the practice of daily livelihood, because villagers are organized quasi around the pagoda and pagoda committees enhance civic associations like parents' unions or credit associations (Aschmoneit 1998: 21).

In this way embedded communities function as social units. These communities are a well-integrated, organic part in some Southeast Asian societies such as Cambodia, Myanmar/Burma and Thailand. The religious institutions carry a variety of potentials for civic engagement, culturally, economically and politically. Furthermore they offer social security. Most notably the traditional Cambodian rice associations, which donate rice to the villagers, are an important part of the local civil society.

In Laos PDR, informal networks like cooperative associations emerged. Among mass-organizations which are close to the Party (for example Lao Women's Union, Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union and Lao Federation of Trade Unions), quite independent civic structures developed in the villages of the Mekong Region. Both in mass-organizations and in smaller autonomous groups, civic virtues are being practiced (Ladwig 2001).

Vietnam shows a specific characteristic regarding the quite independent self-organizing structures in the villages, which mostly contain informal rules and practices. Each village functions as an own republic although it is integrated into bureaucratic structures at the same time. This has certain relevance for Vietnamese civil society and points up the reference to local economic necessities of the villagers.

Only an *action-orientated approach* allows analyzing and comparing civil societies in a manner sensitive to culture. Especially for an intercultural comparison – e.g. the development of civil society in different countries of Southeast Asia –, it is of utmost importance to bear in mind the varying culture-specific meanings of civic actions and structures in a given societal context. Projects of international development cooperation can not work if we do not recognize traditional associations and networks.

A typical Asian definition of civil society is called for. The final goal of an interworking between development policy and local institutions should be an integrating institutional structure, which is able to ensure not only political participation, but economic and social integration based on traditional and modern forms of civil society at the same time (Sen 2001).

It is not sufficient to take into account the mere enumeration of national and international NGOs when trying to comprehend the more complex civic structures in the Mekong Region, as well as their modes and patterns of action. Development projects, which are implemented by international organizations, have to be integrated in traditional organic structures of civil society. The shock of modernization might be easier to be handled through a socially acceptable counterdraft: the existing potentials of self-sustaining help can be activated by linking modern co-operatives to already long-lasting types of self-organization within Southeast Asian societies. By doing so the perceived conflict between artificial and organic organizations might be decreased.

Discussion of Minimum Standards of Civic Structures and Practices

Our empirical findings prove that a discussion about civil society already takes place within the countries of the Mekong Region. In this respect Southeast Asia reflects international debates on the topic as well as the own specific situation. Despite of certain limitations, the Asian discourse about civic structures is a public one with emphasis on the autonomy of a local civil so-

ciety of a specific Southeast Asian type.

Civil society in Southeast Asia not only includes organizations like associations or NGOs, but it also pertains to traditions, custom and various informal practices. As mentioned before, the region's preconditions of transformation have to be borne in mind. Furthermore civic patterns are characterized by different cultural aspects that create various forms of civic actions by a variety of civil society actors in different societal environments.

In order to enhance the knowledge about civil society in Southeast Asia, research on civic structures has to be done from a process-related point of view that conceives civil society as a dynamic and structured way of action. Civil society has to be understood as a social process.

After recognizing the significance of cultural sensitiveness of discourses on civil society, we need to qualify its meaning to the fact that certain values and norms must be developed in order to consider civic structures and practices as such.

Cultural sensitiveness must not excuse the absences of common values and norms which for example is often the case in the Human Rights Debate. Therefore we need a discussion of value and norm to reach consent on minimum standards for structures and practices of civil society. For future empirical research on civic patterns in the Mekong Region from an action-oriented point of view it is important to develop co-ordinates to identify civic practices. We suggest following indicators, which can be used independently from culture and country:

– civic activities shall be voluntary;
– they should be not for individual profit;
– they should contribute to the benefit of society;
– they must be transparent and accessible to the public.

These four criteria are necessary yet not sufficient and demand further differentiation. This realization – the need for fulfillment of minimum standards for civil society activities – implies that civic structures and practices can not just be imposed on other societies (like an institution or organization) but that they have to be learned, exercised and shaped, which again depends on the accordant legal, political, and social framework. Analytic expertise regarding civil society can be mobilized. Hence there must be specific political structures and opportunities that allow people to engage in civic processes. It is important to develop a good governance structure, which on the one hand permits scope for development. On the other hand, guidance of the state is needed in order to foster a proper formation of civil society structures. This makes clear that we do not identify the state as a sphere besides civil society but as a framing of civic patterns of action. State-run institutions have to be included into considerations about a framework for civil society.

Up to now, no alternative concept of civil society has gained as much influence as the one discussed so far. Rather than separating civil society from market and state, the action-oriented concept thrives to understand civil society as a structured way of acting, generating effects, and being effective in every societal field.

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