

The Space for Civil Society: Shrinking? Growing? Changing?

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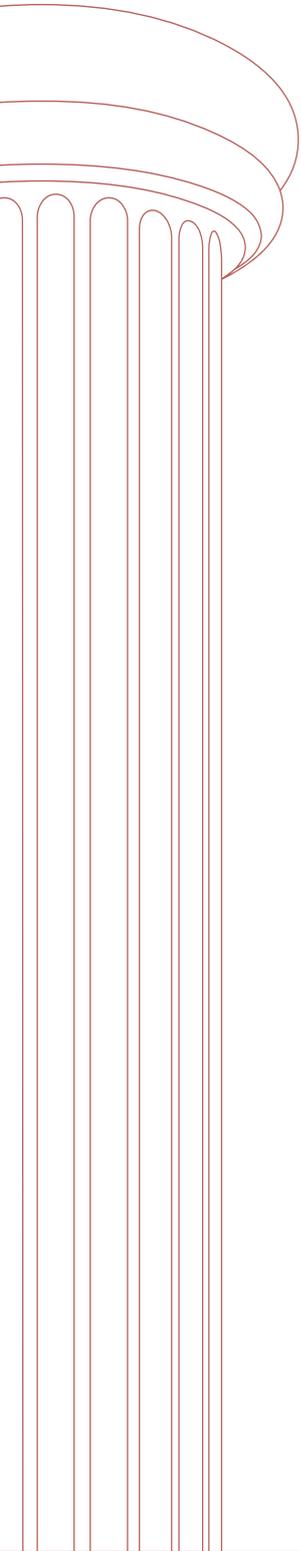
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**The Space for Civil Society:
Shrinking? Growing? Changing?**

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The **Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society** was founded in 1997. Initially it was organized in the form of a non-commercial limited company and in 2010 it was integrated into the Maecenata Foundation. The Institute was affiliated with the Humboldt-University of Berlin from 2004 to 2013. Today it is a recognized independent research centre. The Institutes' aim is to promote knowledge about civil society (the so-called third sector), through academic teaching and publications. The institute is a limited entity of the Maecenata Foundation (Munich), with its main workplace in Berlin.
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Shrinking or Changing?

By Rupert Strachwitz

1. The Issue

“The last decade has witnessed contrasting developments. CSOs are now widely recognised as development actors in their own right. They have increased in number and respond to new social bases, building coalitions at all levels. CSOs stand out thanks to their capacity to reach out to, empower, represent, and defend vulnerable and socially excluded groups, and trigger social innovation. Against this background, governments in several countries have strengthened their engagement with CSOs. Yet the relationship between states and CSOs is often delicate. A limited tradition of dialogue still prevails in many countries and far too often the space for civil society remains narrow or is shrinking, with severe restrictions applied”¹.

This analysis, originating in a governmental organisation, sums up well what has happened to the phenomenon of civil society over the past ten or fifteen years. The hopes that the lessons learnt from the late 1980s and early 1990s, the latter being hailed as the “decade of civil society”², most particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, but also in South Africa and other regions have not been fulfilled. While on the one hand, in academia as in the field, the notion that collective action in society is exercised in three distinct arenas, has increasingly become commonplace, this has not meant that society would in fact develop in a manner which would involve these arenas operating on a level playing field and in respectful cooperation with each other. Over the last few years in particular, the world has seen growth, competition and an increasingly blurred rather than clear vision of which arena should be engaging in what. This has to do with the rise of the global market place as with that of transnational and intergovernmental governance, with the revolution of communication technology as with state and market failures, with an increasing focus on participatory democracy as with the sharp decline of trust in institutions in general, with the rise of populist and anti-elitist movements as with efforts to preserve traditional structures.

It is time to examine what exactly this means for civil society, given that ‘a shrinking space’ has become a catch-word³ while others would contend that the space has actually grown beyond a tolerable dimension. Described as “foreign agents” or in other derogatory terms (Amnesty 2016), their activities are classified as hindering rather than promoting the development of society, while on the other hand, a plethora of events in Tunis, Kairo, Istanbul, Teheran, Kiev, Paris, London, and more recently Warsaw and Budapest have shown the world that the people will not refrain from assembling on their own accord and voicing their opinions under special

¹ European Commission 2012, p.3-4

² act alliance 2011, p.2

³ Civicus 2015

circumstances, be they critical or affirmative. In this sense, the space of civil society has actually grown.

This paper will attempt to put the development of civil society into focus, exemplifying it by some key cases. In order to do so, a few basic terms of reference need to be introduced.

2. What is Civil Society?

The term 'civil society' has been used in a number of different ways since the times of Aristotle. Since Adam Ferguson's 'Essay on the History of Civil Society' (1767) it has become part of the political philosophy of Europe and North America, with Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) providing the first comprehensive analysis of its relevance. Antonio Gramsci (1948) added a Marxist perspective. Yet, today's common usage is different and is not undisputed among scholars. The mainstream definition describes civil society in analytical rather than normative terms as an arena comprising numerous actors with widely different aims, sizes, and governance models, but united by a few definitory elements including a voluntary urge, a self-defined public benefit goal, a not-for-profit priority, independence from government, a non-distribution clause regarding any profits made, and an autonomous governance system. While civil society activities commonly thrive in societies based on principles of human and civil rights, the rule of law, and democracy, none of these are preconditions to the development or existence of civil society. Indeed, as could be seen in Central and Eastern Europe pre 1989, civil society can at times be most powerful under adverse conditions. In relationship to other spheres of society, civil society may be supportive, or voice concern and protest or indeed be instrumental in creating subcultures. This division was described by Albert Hirschman (1970) as 'loyal, exit, and voice'. Within civil society, two main groups of actors may be identified: (1) organized civil society, i.e. associations and foundations with a stable organisational form and governance structure, and (2) unorganized civil society, consisting of spontaneous gatherings and groups, which may or may not eventually adopt a more organized form. All these actors are active in one or several of seven types of activity⁴:

- service provision
- advocacy
- self help
- watch dog
- intermediary
- community building
- policy shaping.

The civil society arena, unlike the arenas of the state and the market, does not in itself provide any representative structures. Therefore, there can be no formally elected representatives of civil society as such. Agents, actors, and experts need to be fairly chosen by other participants

⁴ Strachwitz 2014, p.81

in any dialogue with civil society. Finally, contrary to widespread belief, civil society does not aspire to be inherently “good” in a moral, ethical, or politically welcome sense. There exists what is commonly termed a “dark side of civil society”, and individual actors are not necessarily pleasing to others. In normative terms, categories such as a strict refutation of violence, respect for other views and opinions, adherence to human and civil rights, and a drive towards an open society are seen as suitable for judging civil society actors. The importance of these judgements should not be underestimated⁵.

3. Civil Society and the State

From the 16th to the 20th century, the state, and the nation state in particular, in theory and practice adopted an attitude of overall responsibility for the welfare of the people, legitimized by ‘the grace of God’, popular consent, or force. This eventually developed into an assumed supremacy in all matters public, as exemplified by Hegel who put the state above what he termed civil society to mean any other collective action, be it commercial or non-commercial (Keane 2006, 11). Totalitarian systems obviously enhanced this view to mean that an individual’s rights were a grace and favour offered by the state. The theory of civil society in a modern sense would certainly not agree to this, putting the individual first as the principal, and describing all collectivities, be they governmental, commercial or other, as agents accountable to the principal. Yet, even in democratic societies, in Europe with the exception of the Netherlands and Switzerland in particular, a top-down view of society prevailed well into the 20th century, and longer than that if one were to analyze the mindset of most agents of the government system. Little wonder therefore that traditional state theory could only accept civil society in a service providing and possibly a community building role, and in subservience to the state. Since the 1990s however, the national state as a concept has come under pressure and subsequently lost power – to transnational and supranational organisations, to regional and local governmental entities, and to the business community. While in 1990, for example, (West) Germany was the only EU member state with a federal state structure and was habitually classified as never having achieved the ultimate goal of national statehood, today, Belgium, Italy, and Spain, as well as the United Kingdom have undergone substantial constitutional moves towards federalism, and even France has devolved state powers. While in 1990, “national” businesses could still be considered the norm, picking a friendly governmental constituency has become as commonplace with the growing community of global business players as has multinational ownership. Besides, civil society activities, considered a fairly marginal affair a generation ago (although some lessons might have been learned from protest movements in Korea, the US, and elsewhere), have reached a stage when the governments’ arm can effectively be twisted by protests in the streets, advocacy campaigns, and even big service providers’ lobbying efforts. Besides, the increasing lack of

⁵ Garton Ash 1990, p.147

trust in any kind of large institutions has created a substantial overall trust vacuum, which new players, including but by no means exclusively CSOs, have been eager to fill. Furthermore, certain recent events have enhanced the importance of civil society. In Germany, it was the 2015 refugee crisis⁶.

Still, governments today, while realizing that social change and development can only be achieved with and certainly not against civil society, have yet to develop a coherent policy based on this fundamental shift. Since this necessarily involves a more participatory governance model, they are reluctant to do so. While not wishing to lose more power than they can help it and clinging to the paraphernalia of power, they tend to “muddle through” in finding a new *modus vivendi* with other contributors to the public good. The national governments are the least interested in yielding power to civil society, while transnational bodies like the European Union, the Council of Europe, and even the United Nations appreciate the independent views presented by non-governmental bodies. At the same time, national governments are interested in cheap service delivery (due to the volunteers attracted predominantly by CSOs), while resenting CSOs questioning the supreme authority and wisdom of the state. Political regimes that lean towards authoritarian principles of government however provide solutions based on formally shrinking the space of civil society. Russia, China, and lately Hungary, Poland, and Turkey have become best known for measures aimed at curtailing civil society activities. At short term, these measures present grave problems to civil society organisations; however, whether they will succeed at effectively making civil society shrink in the long run, seems extremely doubtful, given the global revolution of communication and the development of a world-wide political theory of acceptance of spontaneous and organized civic engagement that prevails today, and that makes citizens from all walks of life and of all ages take to the streets when they feel this is needed⁷. It no longer seems feasible to control, let alone determine all collective activity top-down, even less to limit private initiative to business activities, even if the latter’s aims – making a profit – seem more easily to be seen through and controlled. “Third spaces are problematic in every time and space. ... But where they can be found and sustained, such third spaces contain the chance that people ... make the world a better place.”⁸. This view is here to stay.

4. Civil Society and the Market

Finally, it seems necessary to look at the relationship between civil society and the arena of the market, a sphere of public life the importance and sheer size of which has grown beyond all expectations since the failure of the state-run economies. Thinking and acting in terms of competitiveness in the market and customer relationships have since become paramount,

⁶ Becker et al. 2016

⁷ Hessel 2010

⁸ Van Til 2008, p.206

even with the state and in civil society. Few people, to give just one example, objected when government departments started calling citizens customers.

Some civil society actors are at the same time important market actors. German Caritas employs approx. 500,000 staff, which makes it one of the largest non-governmental employers in Europe. Approx. 50% of all hospital beds are managed by CSOs in Germany, while more than 35% today are managed by for-profit companies, compared to less than 10% 25 years ago. Needless to say, they operate in direct competition with each other. On the other hand, CSOs enjoy tax exemption and have access to government subsidies that businesses do not. Supranational organisations charged with enforcing free market principles, the European Commission for one, are therefore constantly being lobbied by business associations to put an end to what they see as undue privileges and unfair competition. The backbone of organized civil society, the large social welfare organisations, have in many cases had to adapt to new rules by creating for-profit tax-paying subsidiaries or even abandoning certain services that could no longer be described as having been forced upon them due to market failure.

The general public has traditionally viewed CSO market activities with some suspicion. It has been argued – and in some cases proven – that the CSO form is no more than a ruse to deliberately cash in on the advantages in financial, tax, and in marketing terms, accorded to registered and accepted CSOs. This constitutes a major change from a generation ago when social welfare and educational CSOs tended to be seen as “somehow part of government”. The scandals, and most particularly the disclosure of salaries and fringe benefits earned surrounding the international sports world – FIFA, the IOC etc. – have naturally made people even more suspicious, not to speak of cases of outright corruption. And admittedly, civil society is not beyond criticism in terms of transparency, accountability and a strict separation from for-profit activities. Yet, in terms of size, numbers, turnover etc. civil society has undoubtedly undergone a 30-odd year period of substantial growth.

This, combined with an alleged, and again in some cases justified, lack of professional efficiency, has thrown traditional areas of civil society activities open to market competition. Services like ambulances is one area; more importantly, international aid today is rapidly moving towards a commercial market, in the hands of international corporations, readily accepted by governmental aid organisations as flexible, knowledgeable, and experienced partners⁹. Even educational and research institutions are quite regularly funded and operated by businesses, which makes the state and civil society seem at having lost out in an area that was theirs alone for centuries.

Finally, since some years back, we can see a new movement emerging that aims at combining personal and public benefit aims. Social entrepreneurs, social businesses, and other kinds of

⁹ Economist 2016, p.47

business models are being developed that may well blur the traditional divide between for-profit and not-for-profit. Young entrepreneurs who wish to do something worth while with their lives while remaining for-profit entrepreneurs and voluntarily waiving part of their real or potential profits, are competing with traditional CSOs that have moved steadily into a business mindset just short of distribution of profits, or have stayed behind in an administrative mode. Furthermore, movements such as convivialism¹⁰ are advocating a new way of conducting business that comes very close to and may well overtake established NGOs in their attitude on how to balance their books.

To sum up, it may well be that civil society, while expanding beyond all expectations in the 1990s, due to state and market failure, did not foresee the implications this rise in scope, potential, and power would entail, including reactions on the part of other societal actors who feel they are being unfairly crowded out of an increasing, potentially power-ridden and potentially profitable scope of activities. A devastating lack of critical research and a reluctance of CSOs to face the changes around them and reflect on their changed position has given both the state and the market the urge and possibly the chance to recuperate and drive civil society back into the margins. Some large CSOs do now see the signs on the wall and are discussing how to move away from the other arenas, but while this is happening, the space for civil society is certainly changing.

¹⁰ Les Convivialistes 2014

The Changing Social Fabric

By Mareike Alscher, Eckhard Priller

1. Introduction

Current evolutions regarding the scope of civil society should be referred to as “Changing space” although the term „Shrinking Space“ has become quite common by now. But the diagnosis of a “Shrinking Space” fails to consider the complete picture by concentrating mainly on legal changes, and thus perceiving civil society as a plaything at the hands of the state. This perspective neglects the autonomy of civil society as an independent and distinct sphere of society. Too little attention is paid to the fact that additional framework conditions also have a substantial influence on the structure of civil society. Taking a closer look at the intrinsic conditions of civil society should allow us to substantiate the assertion that one should refer to a “Changing -” rather than to a “Shrinking space” for civil society.

2. Influential factors on Civil Society

In a first step, we must consider the various influential factors that bring about change in civil society. In his report, Prince Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, UN High-Commissioner for Human Rights recently identified five key-elements for creating and sustaining a favourable environment for civil society¹¹:

- A robust legal framework that is in accordance with international standards and allows an effective access to justice
- A favourable political climate
- Access to information
- Opportunity for participation in decision making processes
- Long-term support through adequate resources

This enumeration is clearly tailored to reflect the specific needs of human rights organisations and is thus incomplete. Two general factors that have not made it onto the list are demographic change and social inequality. Since the influence these factors exert vary widely depending on the country or region, the following statements will specifically concentrate on Germany as an example.

3. Demographic change

Obviously, the impact of demographic change on civil society depends on the country taken into account. Countries with high migratory fluctuations, an increasingly ageing population or a low mortality rate face different challenges than those with little to no migration, a low average age and a short life expectancy.

¹¹ Auswärtiges Amt (2016, S. 217)

In Germany, the current demographic change is linked to an increased material prosperity. To name a few aspects that characterize this development:

- Life expectancy increases due to better nutrition, growing health consciousness and a well-developed system of health care provision.
- Despite a discrete reversal of this trend in recent years, less and less children are born. In 2015 women gave birth to an average of 1.5 children.
- The overall population is growing older. There are fewer younger and more older people.
- Cities steadily gain inhabitants, whereas the density of the population drops continuously in rural areas.
- New ways of living together are gaining importance; simultaneously more people are living alone.
- As a peaceful and prosperous country, Germany attracts many migrants. The share of citizens from a migrant background is constantly growing.

One of the most important impacts of the demographic change in Germany is the changing age structure of the country. Since 1972 the mortality has surpassed the birth rate which leads to a decreasing population.

In 2050 there will be almost four million more pensioners than in 2014. At the same time, the working age population will have decreased by nearly seven million and the population in an educational period by 1,5 million.

Furthermore, demographic change is characterized by a certain rural exodus, that in turn leads to a growth of population in urban centres. Particularly strong among young people in the Eastern federal states during the last 25 years, migration from rural areas to the cities has become a pan-German phenomenon that represents opportunities but also risks for German civil society.

Demographic change affects society as a whole and has to be dealt with. Not all tasks we are facing in this context are entirely new. It appears that demographic change emphasizes existing problems and gives them a greater urgency. Arguably, civil society is well equipped to play a key role in solving them.

4. A changing social fabric. Increasing social inequality

In addition to demographic developments, changes in the social fabric, in particular an increasing social inequality play an important role in how civil society is evolving. Measuring the extent of social inequality allows conclusions as to the chance each citizen gets to shape his/her life the way he/she wants it, and to actively participate in decision making processes regarding society in general, as well as civil society.

Social inequality occurs when the provision of resources (level of education, income level) or the living conditions (housing condition, health, safety) are distributed in a way that chronically gives preferential treatment to one part of society and disadvantages the other.¹²

The extent and the specific nature of social inequality can be evaluated based on both material and immaterial factors such as assets, income, education, social capital, social background and gender.

As proven by research on civil society, participation and community involvement, these factors have a substantial impact on the prospects of civil society. In other words: socio-economically marginalized citizens have a lesser chance to actively participate in civil society than others.

For a German context, it is understood that civil society organisations increasingly have mechanisms in place that lead to the selection and exclusion of certain population groups.

This is due to the structure and function of civil society organisations that is based on articulation of interests, autonomy and sociability.

Social inequality is by no means a German phenomenon, it is an international one. Despite the goal of equality of sorts that has become a cultural guiding principle among western nations, all data available point in the opposite direction. A clear majority of people live in countries in which the divide between richer and poorer parts of society keeps growing deeper. This is tightly linked with a proliferation of precarious jobs on the one hand and a continuous growth of material wealth on the other.

In Germany, growing social inequality translates itself into the fact that the wealthiest ten per cent of the population own more than half of the net assets, as recently shown by the national report on poverty and wealth.¹³

Internationally, this divide can also be identified regarding other crucial factors such as education and gender. The developing world in particular faces a serious backlog in terms of education that needs to be addressed. Since education often correlates with gender and income, women often do not have the same access to education and, even if educated, are not paid equally. However, this gender pay gap is tangible in Germany as well. On average, women earn 22% less than men. If their education and professional field is taken into account the difference is still up to 6%. This income-disparity is obviously due to gender.

¹² Hradil, Stefan / Schiener, Jürgen (2005, S.27-46)

¹³ Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales (2017)

5. Consequences for and expectations of civil society

Civil society does not remain unaffected by demographic change and increasing social inequality. Up to now, German civil society has failed to adjust to demographic change and social inequality, due the fact that civil society organisations tend to act in the here-and-now. Due to their structures and operational mechanisms they are more oriented towards their members than towards the surrounding circumstances. Additionally, they cannot plan ahead due to often chronically precarious financial conditions. This overall situation prevents numerous organisations from concentrating on societal developments, which is not without consequences.

I will now discuss some consequences and expectations for the German context in greater detail.

A. Changes of the organisational landscape

Due to demographic change and the changing social fabric the organisational landscape is bound to change. In Germany, a decreasing population density will in turn lead to a decreasing density of organisations. The number of organisations will most probably stop growing to the same extent as in the past, even decreasing numbers are to be expected. Newly established organisations will increasingly face difficulties with complying to the minimum number of members necessary. This in turn might start a trend towards small and individually organised groups, with changing structures and new forms of activity. How the current conditions will affect the organisation's work and how a best possible organisational landscape should be structured given the current developments remains to be seen.

B. Changes in participation

In light of the outlined demographic and socio-economic developments, it is to be expected that the structure of civic commitment will continue to change.

- Especially in the context of day-to-day organisational practice, complaints can be heard regarding the difficulties to find committed people. In a substantial survey we conducted in 2011/12, only 20% of the interviewed organisations stated that they did not have difficulties finding volunteers¹⁴. 68 % of the organisations were facing increasingly overaged members as well as a decreasing sense of community. Demographic change certainly will lead to a lack of younger volunteers and in turn to a growing number of elderly ones. Not only does the number of elderly volunteers grow, people in general have a longer life expectancy and thus are healthy and able to be active for a longer

¹⁴ Vgl. Priller et al. (2012)

time in their lives. Current migratory movements will result in an increasing number of volunteers with a migration background.

- Moreover, research on participation and volunteering points towards the fact that a low level of education as well as unemployment hamper civic engagement. Data shows that increasing social inequality excludes socially marginalized people from the sphere of civil society. Questions need to be asked about the democratic nature of civil society organizations: if the above mentioned marginalizing mechanisms grow even less permissive this could entail a delegitimation of civil society structures.

C. Changes of the financial situation

Demographic changes will make themselves felt in the funding of civil society organisations. Less members lead to fewer financial resources. The amount of membership fees and member-related donations will drop, access to public funding will be limited due to increased competition and project funding will become more important.

How to handle financial needs and how to tap into new sources of funding will become the predominant question for the future development of the civil society infrastructure. Looking for ways to better include socio-economically marginalised groups could be one solution to this fundamental problem. Of course, this would entail a significant effort and require the development of full-time structures. Organisations are already reacting to this need by intensifying their plea for major gifts.

D. Changes in performance demand

Overall, framework conditions for civil society organisations under the current demographic and socio-economic circumstances are not improving. Yet, the need for the services civil society provides is increasing continually. It is thus crucial that civil society starts adapting to the changing age-structure and the social and health-related aspects this change entails. For instance, civil society organisations will face an increased demand for counselling and assistance. On the organisational level, the decreasing density of the population will require more cooperation and collaboration on the local level. In this way, civil society could help securing livelihoods in the long-term. This is the challenge civil society must meet in the future.

The Logic of Development

by Susanne Ratka

1 Civil Society and individual responsibility

The familiar phrase that there is nothing permanent except change is certainly a truism. The present generation has witnessed a number of radical changes in the world, most which nobody could have preconceived. Just a few examples from the world of politics: The USSR has fallen apart, the Berlin Wall has come down, Nelson Mandela was released from prison to be President of the former apartheid regime in South Africa, and a number of years later an African American statesman, Barak Obama, became President of the United States. In Germany, since 2005, a woman, Angela Merkel, has been Chancellor. However, in many countries today, difficult situations exist. Take the Heinrich Böell Foundation's publication on the development and trends of democratization world-wide¹ and even more Ben Hayes's study on the ploys of FATF (Financial Action Task Force)² published by Brot für die Welt! One might easily lose hope for a moment and think it may at this point in history be better to duck and cover. But sometimes it is good to take a small step back from our daily business, take a breath and look at the whole picture.

When I was a child, civic education was part of the curriculum, and this is what was taught: „The family is the nucleus of democracy.“ In Germany as in many other countries this is no longer true today, since society has undergone substantial changes. I would therefore like to make a case that the emancipated individual is the nucleus of democracy. Never before have we been so well informed as we are today – or in a position to gain information. This goes for every single one of us. It is matched by an added responsibility. Better education and access to digital media (with all its negative side effects) render this development the same more less everywhere in the world.

2. Shrinking spaces and growing resistance

Effects of this have already be seen in many countries where spontaneous demonstrations and gatherings of citizens have led to more organized forms of protest. What has been termed the 'colour revolutions' are good examples for this:

- the rose revolution in Georgia (2003),
- the orange revolution in Ukraine (2004),
- the cedar revolution in Lebanon (2005),
- the tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005),
- the saffron revolution in Myanmar (2007),
- the jasmin revolution in Tunisia (2010/2011).

¹Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Dossier: For Democracy, 16.06.10. <https://www.boell.de/en/dossier-democracy>

²Bread for The World, Ben Hayes; Study, Analysis 68, The impact of international counterterrorism on civil society organizations, April 2017

Most of these protest movements have, as known, caused backlashes of the existing systems, and only history can tell if they really initiated change.

Individuals with a vision have become active, and started organisations with friends and like-minded people. Some of these have become very big NGOs. A few random examples:

- Greenpeace was founded in Canada in 1971 by 12 citizens with a boat, to stop a U.S. nuclear arms test. Today Greenpeace has more than 3 million members worldwide.
- Attac was founded in Paris in 1998, based on an idea of the journalist Ignazio Romanet. Today, there are 90,000 members, and Attac is active in 50 countries.
- Foodwatch was founded in Berlin in 2002 by former Greenpeace executive director Thilo Bode. Today, Foodwatch has 35,000 members and donors.
- Stop TTIP Quickly became an alliance of 500 small European organizations.
- Mehr Demokratie was founded in 1988 by a handful of German Green Party politicians and other interested activists, and today has more than 10,000 members.
- Umweltinstitut München was founded in 1986 directly after the Chernobyl catastrophe by some committed citizens and scientists in Munich, Germany. Today, it has approx. 7,000 members.
- Pulse of Europe, one of the most recent movements, was founded as a pro-European initiative by a married couple in Frankfurt in late 2016, and is active in 11 European countries today.

This list is anything but comprehensive. In addition, ideas and movements like Degrowth, Deep Ecology and Convivialism are making their impact on our time. And more recently still, on 22nd April, 2017, a March for Science was an immediate and spontaneous reaction to the endangering conditions in Turkey, Hungary, the US and other countries. In 520 cities worldwide, hundreds of thousands of citizens, 40,000 in Washington D.C. alone, senior academics, students and many others protested on the streets together for academic freedom. Many of those who marched had done so for the last time in the late 1960s.

On 6th May, 2017, thousands of Polish citizens followed the call of the opposition parties to participate in the 'March for Freedom' to protect democracy in their country. A few days later, on Victory Day, the main Russian national holiday, thousands of people took part in anti-corruption rallies in Moscow and St. Petersburg, fully conscious of the fact that many would be arrested. What we are seeing here and elsewhere is that attempts to shrink democratic spaces will not remain unanswered. Citizens everywhere are resisting attempts to cut back their human and civil rights, even under endangering conditions. The 'Zeitgeist', the spirit of the age, cannot be put back into the bottle.

Civil society has certainly evolved as a strong contributor to societal matters and developments. But more than the state and the market, it is in a constant state of flux, as new movements are born, grow, become established and eventually are integrated into mainstream. They may become established market players, or they may lose their purpose or their zeal and disappear. Some movements may become important, rise and inspire many

people, like the movement of intentional communities, related groups and ideas. Others may remain small and yet important or continue to act on the fringes of society.

3. Intentional communities a promising movement

A case study may help to understand the complexity and distinctive quality of civil society development: There is some evidence that, if given the option, many people would prefer a living situation less isolated than what most experience today. The human being seems to have a natural preference for living in community. One of many initiatives from this field may serve as the case study:

For about 40 years now, a growing number of individuals, groups and families are dreaming of escaping what they increasingly see as consumerism and exploitation. For some, this has led to a next step by taking action to create an intentional community and found a cohousing project or ecovillage, an Intentional Community being defined as “a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared values”³ The concept of ecovillages is known since the late 1980s. In the U.S., the first utopian settlements were started by the hippy movement; in Germany, it all started with some initiatives loosely connected to the aftermath of the extra-parliamentary opposition and students’ movement of the late 1960s and 70s. Until some time ago, these intentional communities thought of themselves as counter-models to the cultural mainstream and abstracted themselves from society. Thus, they epitomized Albert Hirschman’s categorization of an ‘exit’ type organization as opposed to those he defined as ‘loyal’ or ‘voice’⁴. Today there is more willingness in these communities to open up to society as well as for society to interact with the communities, in a common effort to look for alternatives and solutions for some of the challenges of our time⁵ All these places and projects can be seen as laboratories and experiments for a more livable, regenerative and humanly connected future.

Ecovillages are not necessarily rural, some projects like the Los Angeles Ecovillage, Le Case in San Diego and Avalon in Detroit exist in an urban context. Nonetheless, these communities focus on environmental sustainability with solar energy, grey water systems, living roofs and composting sanitary systems. In Ghana, Senegal and India, there are examples of traditional villages evolving into sustainable ecovillages and thus enhancing the life of their residents with permaculture, reforestation programs, solar power plants and water management solutions. “The kind of change required by sustainability implicates each community, each household, each individual. Successful solutions to problems at this level of society will need to be rooted

³Fellowship for Intentional Community(USA), goes back to the year 1937, sees its mission in supporting and promoting the development of intentional communities and the evolution of cooperative culture, www.ic.org/the-fellowship-for-intentional-community/

⁴ Hirschman (1970)

⁵Around 500 ecovillages worldwide are members of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), but there are perhaps more than 1000. In addition, there are movements like Sarvodaya in Indonesia with 1800 villages, more then 300+ transition towns and hundreds of green-focused cohousing communities.

in the cultural specificity of the town or region if the people are to be supportive of and involved in such change.”⁶

The most important work these communities do is to develop new ways of communicating and taking decisions as a group. All of them had to learn that it is not enough to have good intentions and that structural differences are important. Tools like nonviolent communication, the talking stick, consensus decisions, sociocracy, and fora help develop more consciousness on the way to communal governance.

The network provides many opportunities to exchange knowledge and experiences. E.g., in China, a network called the Sunshine Ecovillage Network (SEN) and GEN offered training programs to government representatives, as they had officially expressed an interest in exploring the potential transforming 70 of the most beautiful traditional villages in China. In Germany, village mayors from marginal, economically difficult regions have recently approached the national branch of GEN, to see how they could establish ecovillages, in order to bring young people and families to these regions. Thus, Hirschman’s ‘loyal’ has been added to the defining elements of the movement.

Finally, GEN is politically active and has consultative status with ECOSOC⁷ since 2000, is represented at regular briefings at UN headquarters and participated in the Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio 2012. In Hirschman’s terminology, GEN has become a ‘voice’ organization. Ross Jackson, founder of the gaia trust⁸, reminds us: “It is at the grass roots level we must look if we are to expect revolutionary change to occur. the only real solutions always come from the bottom and work their way up. Fortunately, there is a small minority that has the right priorities, the right understanding, and the courage to act in opposition to the dominant culture. They are many and they are found in all walks of life and in all countries.”⁹

The ecovillage and community movement may surely be termed one of the generators of social change in our world. It shares this mission with hundreds of thousands of large and small, old and new, mainstream and radical, established and struggling movements and organizations everywhere in the world. The number and impact of these is steadily growing, despite all efforts to hedge them in, suppress them or corrupt them. Given these examples, the space for civil society cannot be seen as shrinking, but indeed as changing as rapidly as the world itself, and indeed as importantly contributing to this change.

⁶UNESCO, *Educating for a Sustainable Future: A Transdisciplinary Vision for Concerted Action* (1997), par. 114

⁷The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was established by the UN Charter in 1945 as one of the six main organs of the United Nations.

⁸Gaia Trust is a Danish-based charitable association founded in 1987 on the initiative of Ross and Hildur Jackson, with the intention of supporting the transition to a sustainable and more spiritual future society through grants and proactive initiatives. Gaia Trust has always been self-funded. Gaia Trust’s strategy has always been two-pronged with yin and yang components. The yin component was to support the ecovillage movement through grants, while the yang component was to invest its capital in “green” startup companies that would complement the grants policy, creating jobs and promoting more sustainable businesses

⁹Ross Jackson: A Global Civilization in Harmony (<http://gaia.org/gaia-trust/our-vision>)

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