

## In their Own Image : Donor Assistance to Civil Society

With the end of the Cold War and the apparent triumph of liberal democracy and capitalist routes to development, donor agencies have harnessed the concept of civil society to promote a paradigm of development that is no longer limited to the agencies of State and market players. Such a paradigm envisages civil society playing a role not only in democratisation but also in economic development. By the mid-1990s the idea of civil society had become part of everyday development discourse. New civil society departments with their bevy of civil society officers, experts and consultants mushroomed in the headquarters and field offices of development agencies, yielding the fruits of specific programmes and projects for strengthening civil society. The desirability of a space for autonomous association and the assumed benign and essentially democratic character of the organisations populating that space seemed self-evident.

It is the purpose of this article to look critically at donor attempts to build and mould civil societies in aid-recipient contexts. We begin by outlining the political and economic background within which donors encountered the notion of civil society. In the second section we examine the modalities used to strengthen civil society. Finally we explore some of the challenges arising from external donor assistance to transitional and southern civil societies, noting in particular the issues of plurality, the forces of social and political change, dependency, elitism, and universality.

### Donor Discovery of Civil Society

From the 1950s to 1980s multilateral and bilateral donor agencies channelled the bulk of development assistance to governments. As non governmental organisations grew in number and prominence from the mid-1970s onwards, aid agencies paid increasing attention to their actual and potential role in development processes<sup>1</sup>. By the late 1980s most bilateral

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1. Not all agencies recognised or engaged with NGOs to the same extent in the 1970s and 1980s. Whilst in the late 1970s UNDP already acknowledged the gains to be made from working with NGOs, the process was much slower and more fraught for the World Bank. For further details of the engagement of these agencies with NGOs, see Howell & Pearce, 2001 : 95-98.

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donors channelled some of their development funding through NGOs, regarding NGOs in general as legitimate partners in development. In the early 1990s the concept of civil society began to enter donor discourse, sometimes being used interchangeably for NGOs, but at other times referring to the broader idea of a space for association, which incorporated not only NGOs but also trade unions, faith-based organisations, business associations and human rights groups. Donor enthusiasm for the concept soon translated into a range of practical initiatives aimed at securing the space for people to associate and at supporting particular organisations. The reasons for this donor discovery of civil society are complex, relating in no small part to the end of the Cold War and the changing global political context. Here we look in turn at the various factors, which, at a particular historical moment, combined to bring the concept of civil society to centre-stage.

The encounter of particular donor agencies with civil society and their enthusiasm for this concept has to be situated within a broader context of growing disillusion with the State as both agent of economic development and locus of justice. These political assaults upon the State took place within the ideological context of the rise of neo-liberalism, which celebrated the allocative efficiencies of the market and derided the State as an agency for economic growth and management. As Thatcherism prompted the rolling-back of the State in the UK, a similar strategy was pursued by Mahathir in Malaysia and Pinochet in Chile. The large US budget deficit along with the pressures of globalisation to restructure led USA and Western Europe to follow suit in due course. The international financial institutions soon administered the same medicine in the form of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) to the ailing economies in Sub-Saharan Africa and the newly emerging States in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

The resurgence of the concept of civil society took place not only against the background of a neo-liberal tide, but also at a time when seemingly enduring oppressive regimes were coming under increasing challenge. Adam Michnik in Poland and Vaclav Havel in the former Czechoslovakia invoked the concept of civil society to articulate their opposition to the authoritarianism of actually existing socialism (Arato 1981 ; Havel 1988 ; Michnik, 1985). In the West the hegemonic period of Thatcherism ironically also stimulated a revival of interest in the work of Gramsci and civil society. Just as Gramsci had criticised Leninist parties in the 1920s and 1930s for failing to win people's minds, thus ceding the path to fascism, in the late 1980s left-wing academics, such as Stuart Hall, likewise challenged the radical left to build upon people's commonsense and fashion a counter-hegemony within the arena of civil society (Simon 1991 : 14-15 ; Hall 1991 : 114-130).

Throughout the 1980s authoritarian states began to fall one after another as a wave of democratisation swept across Africa and Latin America, underlining the power of social movements, mass protests and grassroots organisations to challenge oppressive rule. This anti-statist sentiment took an added twist as international financial institutions began to reassess structural adjustment programmes which not only had miserably failed to stimulate economic growth in Sub-Saharan countries but also had aggravated inequalities and diminished access for the poor to basic needs such as education and health (Cornea, Jolly & Stewart 1987). Whilst taking

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on board the reformist critique of giving SAPS a « human face », international financial institutions turned their attention to the indigenous governments. Rather than faulting the tenets of SAPs, donors stressed the importance of « good governance », emphasising the need for democratisation, accountability and participation. It was here that civil society entered the stage as the site and agency of both resistance to authoritarian rule and people's participation in the development process.

Donor critique of « poor governance » in the South occurred against a backdrop of growing recognition of the « comparative advantages » of NGOs amongst development agencies (Fowler 1988). In the light of State incapacities, NGOs were gradually conceived as « alternative » deliverers of social services and welfare, as well as sites of resistance to authoritarian rule. With the growing reliance on market forces, the apparent independence of NGOs from the State reinforced the notion of autonomy. Whilst the State was often depicted as venal, clientelistic and incompetent, NGOs were held on a pedestal as moral, people-led and efficient.

With the end of the Cold War the ideological and political rationale behind foreign policy and aid began to lose its persuasive force. Donors began to review their aid programmes, re-examine their goals and objectives, and assess the effectiveness of their strategies. With the collapse of socialism as a credible systemic alternative to capitalism, debates about the appropriate role of State and market could move beyond the deadlock of rigid ideological positions. The moment for civil society to enter as a third actor in development aid had come. For some agencies, such as USAID, the threat of budgetary cuts pushed them towards greater engagement with both the private sector and civil society organisations as a way of maintaining developmental assistance.

Throughout the 1990s the concept of civil society was increasingly absorbed into donor discourse. As the trinity of State, civil society and the market dislodged the Cold War dichotomy of State or market, it seemed as though the concept of civil society had always been part of development rhetoric and practice. At first donor agencies tended to reduce civil society to NGOs, but as governance programmes expanded in the post-Cold War context, they increasingly involved other types of civil society organisations in their programmes. From the mid-1990s onwards NGOs units metamorphised into civil society departments and donor agencies sprouted civil society projects, civil society officers, civil society experts and civil society challenge funds. Donor agencies began to draw up civil society strategies and develop indicators and methodologies for assessing the nature of civil society and the impact of their support initiatives. In the next section we look more closely at donor attempts to strengthen civil society.

### **Donor Support to Civil Society**

Assessing the amount of donor support to civil society is no easy task. Whilst explicit civil society strengthening initiatives have developed since the 1990s, there is also considerable engagement with civil society organisations in programmes which have aims other than civil society

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strengthening, such as sanitation, health provision, or literacy<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, statistical information on the breakdown of aid in particular agencies does not always use the category of civil society assistance, and such assistance may be subsumed under broader categories such as governance and democracy<sup>3</sup>. Of the £181 million disbursed by the UK Department of International Development (DFID) through the civil society sector between 1998-1999, only 30 % passed through the Civil Society Department (DFID 2000b)<sup>4</sup>. By far the largest support to civil society stems from the USA, with the USAID playing a leading role<sup>5</sup>. According to 1995 statistics, the USA accounted for 85 per cent of all civil society assistance, sponsoring 335 out of 440 civil society projects (Van Rooy & Robinson 1998 : 60).

Apart from the US government a host of bilateral and multilateral agencies engage in various ways with civil societies in the South. Though the UNDP cannot provide funding to non governmental entities, it was an early supporter of NGOs and later civil society, highlighting their contribution to development processes and bringing them into dialogue with UN agencies. Bilateral agencies such as Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA), DFID, Finnish International Development Agency, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD) have established civil society sections, and/or assigned special staff in their field offices to work with civil society, and some have set up special funding schemes to support civil society organisations<sup>6</sup>. In the late 1990s the World Bank changed the name of the NGO unit to NGO and Civil Society unit. Though there are divisions within the World Bank about the appropriate approach to and desired degree of engagement with civil society organisations, there are employees at the higher and lower levels of the organisation, who are strong advocates of working with civil society (Bain 1999 ; Ibrahim 1998 : 13). Apart from bilateral and multilateral development agencies, many foundations and northern NGOs support the development of civil society. Some NGOs such as OXFAM and The Save the Children Fund have a long history of working closely with southern civil society organisations so that they have not established any particular strategy or department for supporting civil society.

In supporting civil society in the South donor agencies pursue a combination of broad goals. These include promoting democratisation, hastening economic development, reducing poverty and strengthening civil

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2. Canadian International Development Agency, for example, channelled US\$ 2.334 billion, that is, more than 38 % of its total programme budget, through civil society organisations in Canada and developing countries. Not all of this was aimed explicitly at supporting civil society strengthening and the total figure is not broken down to reflect this (CIDA, 2001).
  3. For example, 7 % of total bilateral assistance of DANIDA went to projects on democracy, good governance and human rights but the breakdown in terms of allocations to civil society organisations is not given in detail (DANIDA, 2000b). DANIDA channelled 11.2 % of bilateral and multilateral funding through Danish NGOs. However, it is not specified how much of this is passed on to southern civil society organisations.
  4. The remaining 70 % went to the Information Department, Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department, DFID Overseas Offices and the Small Grants Scheme.
  5. Other channels for civil society assistance apart from the USAID include the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, the Carter Center, the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Mott Foundation, and the Asia Foundation.
  6. For example, the UK Department for International Development set up a Challenge Fund in 1999 to strengthen the capacity of poor people to organise themselves and so drive the agenda for change. For further details, see DFID 1999.
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society as a goal in itself. DANIDA, for example, supports civil society so as to reduce poverty, enhance the rights of the poor and increase their participation in decision-making processes (DANIDA 2000a : 30-37). The UK Department for International Development (DFID) supports civil society as a way of ensuring that governments prioritise the needs of the poor and thus increase the effectiveness of work aimed at achieving international development targets (DFID 2000). Within development institutions departments pursue different objectives in engaging with civil society. In USAID, for example, the Centre for Democracy and Governance supports civil society as an essential ingredient in the process of democratisation (Hansen 1996). In other sections of USAID, however, the main goal may be to deploy civil society organisations as vehicles for the delivery of welfare services.

In all cases there is an implicit assumption that civil society, democratisation, economic development and poverty reduction are positively related. As an autonomous arena of association and voice, civil society can provide a crucial check on abuse and corruption by the State. Organisations within civil society can defend and expand this space for association, so protecting civil and political rights, and contributing towards the diffusion of power. By participating in associations citizens foster their skills of critical discussion, persuasion and organisation, thus nurturing the development of a democratic culture. Such assumptions find justification in a vast body of liberal democratic theory. Furthermore, Robert Putnam's (1993) work on social capital and democratisation in contemporary Italy has provided further fuel for the positive linking of civil society with democracy.

Whilst much attention has centred on the importance of civil society in liberal democracies, far less attention has been given to economic development and civil society, or to civil society and poverty reduction. Past European political thinkers such as Alex Ferguson, Hegel, and Karl Marx as well as twentieth century social scientists such as Emile Durkheim and Juergen Habermas have linked the emergence of civil society to the development of industrial capitalism. Marx stated definitively that there could be no civil society without a bourgeoisie, underlining the class nature of civil society and its historical contingency (Marx & Engels 1965 : 27). The notion of the abstract, rational individual, employing reason to debate public issues, resonates well with the neo-classical economic conception of the market actor as a free, utility-maximising, rational individual.

Though the links between civil society and capitalist development have received much comment in the writings of political thinkers, there has been little theoretical justification or empirical investigation of the assumed positive relationship between civil society and poverty reduction. Logically, civil society provides a space where the poor and marginalised can articulate their interests, in a way that is not possible in the market or State - hence its appeal to donors. Yet such a view ignores the vast social, economic and political inequalities that underpin civil society as much as the market or State. Such disparities affect the distribution of power and resources within civil society, rendering it difficult for poor groups to organise, let alone influence government policy or social attitudes<sup>7</sup>.

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7. The approach to civil society which neglects the inequalities within it reflects early versions of pluralist theory associated, for example, with Robert Dahl. Later critiques both within and without pluralist schools of thought drew attention to the inequalities in power between different interest groups. Another area of literature concerned with participation also draws attention to the problem of inequality for effective participation. The experiment

In attempting to engage with, nurture and strengthen civil society, donors have adopted five main approaches, namely, institution- and capacity-building, fostering a legal and regulatory framework favourable to civil society, government, business and civil society partnerships, enhancing financial sustainability, and promoting spaces for dialogue. Whilst in the 1980s donors were already providing support to strengthen the capacity of southern NGOs, the remaining approaches have largely taken off in the 1990s.

Institution-building and capacity-building covers a range of activities such as providing office equipment, buildings, training staff in project management, financial systems, participatory research techniques, cultivating the development of new civil society groups, and assisting them to formulate their goals and objectives. In former socialist countries such as Mozambique, Angola, and the former Soviet Union, donor agencies have played a crucial role in fostering certain types of civil society organisations, such as human rights groups, environmental groups, service-delivery agencies, and women's groups, thus steering the development of civil society. In Central Asia USAID, INTRAC, Soros Foundation, Mercy Corps, UNDP have provided financial and technical assistance to new civil society organisations, as a way to promote processes of democratisation, alleviate poverty, and develop a new model of social welfare which no longer relies solely on the State.

Closely linked with institution-building and capacity strengthening is support to create and develop a regulatory and legislative framework for civil society organisations. In post-socialist states such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Mozambique, as well as in current socialist States such as China and Vietnam such frameworks are crucial for legitimising the activities of civil society organisations, for defining the rights of citizens, and especially their civil and political rights, and for providing a basis for new civil society groups to flourish. In Kazakhstan, for example, local NGOs, parliamentarians and international bodies worked together to draft a new NGO law<sup>8</sup>.

The third approach to supporting civil society is to promote partnerships between local governments, business and civil society. Such partnership arrangements mirror the paradigmatic shift away from debate and theorising around the State and market, depicted as confrontational and ideological, towards the triadic paradigm of a trinity of State, market and civil society, characterised as harmonious and mutually beneficial. Examples of such partnerships include the Partners in Development Programme set up in 1995 by the Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum, the World Bank and the UNDP, and USAID's New Partnership Initiatives launched in 1995 with the goal of forging partnerships between small business, local governments and civil society groups. Another dimension of these new partnerships arrangements are corporate governance initiatives in the USA and the UK, which bring together business, trade unions and NGOs in formulating company codes of conduct. The Ethical Trading Initiative founded in 1997 in the UK brings together trade unions, NGOs, companies such as Littlewoods

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with participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre provides an interesting case-study of how changes in local political processes have proved empowering for poor groups.

8. For further details about Central Asia see Howell and Pearce, 2001 : 183-203.

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and Safeway Stores, and government to develop and promote standards for labour conditions in the companies supplying UK retailers.

Whilst the State can raise revenue through compulsory taxation and private enterprises earn profits, the financial base of civil society organisations is voluntaristic, relying on membership fees, donations from individuals, philanthropists and companies, government grants and donor funding. Widespread poverty, the absence of a strong domestic bourgeoisie and weak State capacity in many southern countries makes it much more difficult for southern civil society groups to raise money locally. For example, in Peru, Colombia and Argentina, user fees and charges rather than public sector grants form the main source of revenue for non-profit agencies (Salamon & Anheier 1999 : 11). Moreover, in the twenty-two countries examined by Salaman & Anheier (1999 : 5), the non-profit sector tended to be larger in more developed countries<sup>9</sup>. As will be discussed later, donors provide the main life-line of support to many organisations in southern civil societies. Some donor agencies have tried to address the issue of the financial sustainability of civil society by promoting the development of local foundations. The World Bank, for example, has developed a bank-foundation strategy to create and support country-level philanthropic foundations. Both the Ford Foundation and the Synergos Institute have attempted to promote philanthropic institutions in the South<sup>10</sup>.

Finally, donor agencies have tried to foster civil society by creating spaces for dialogue, alliance and coalition-building, and strategising for civil society organisations. Perhaps the most comprehensive example of this approach is the involvement of civil society organisations in the formulation of national poverty reduction plans. Though the effectiveness and genuineness of the consultation process for poverty reduction strategy papers has varied across countries<sup>11</sup>, the attempt to achieve a dialogue amongst diverse social groups, organisations, business and government legitimates the participation of civil society organisations in national policy processes and validates the space for association and critical dialogue. Having examined the diverse aims of donor support to civil society, the implicit assumptions underpinning such assistance, and the modalities of support, the next section explores critically some of the challenges for donors and southern civil societies posed by external civil society-strengthening initiatives.

### Challenges of Civil Society Strengthening

In fostering the development of civil society in southern and transitional contexts donor agencies face a number of challenges. These include the illusion of plurality, diversity and social inclusion, identifying the forces of political change, the material dependency of aid-recipient civil society

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9. However, further studies are needed to verify whether this tendency holds for most countries in the South. Salamon's sample of 22 countries did not include any so-called developing countries in Asia or Africa.

10. The Synergos Institute carried out a two-year investigation in 1993 of « foundation-like organisations » in the south and has advocated that debt swaps be directed towards such foundations. Similarly, the Ford Foundation has funded local foundations in India such as the National Foundation for India and the India Foundation for Arts.

11. For a comprehensive review of poverty reduction strategy papers see McGee, 2000.

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organisations on donors, the bias towards urban civil society organisations and the issue of the assumed universality of civil society. We explore each of these in turn.

### *The Illusion of Plurality, Diversity and Social Inclusion*

Donor definitions of civil society often embrace a long list of organisations such as business associations, trade unions, NGOs, churches, human rights groups, farmers' groups, environmental groups and women's organisations. Such long lists of organisations reinforce the normative ideals of pluralism and social inclusion and their mere statement can lead donors to believe that they do work with a broader range of actors than just NGOs. In practice, however, donor agencies tend to work to a greater degree with some kinds of organisations than others. Thus donor engagement is more intense with NGOs than with trade unions or business associations. This discrepancy between normative statement and actual reality relates in turn to the lack of clearly specified aims and objectives for working with civil society on the part of donors. The selection of civil society organisations to work with relies considerably on past practices, personal networks, hunches, instincts and impressions, processes that appear unsystematic and random but which also leave unstated the ideological agendas, normative ideals and values that guide the choice of partners.

Aware of the need for greater order in their engagement with civil society, many donor agencies over the last three years have been developing civil society strategies and criteria for the selection of partners<sup>12</sup>. USAID had started already in 1994 to develop a strategy and has gone furthest in clarifying its goals in engaging with civil society. The Centre for Democracy and Governance in USAID describes its aims as the promotion of sustainable democracies, for which the development of a politically active civil society is one key component. It defines civil society as « non-state organisations that can act as a catalyst for democratic reform ». Hence, it elects to work with human rights groups, lobbying groups, business associations, environmental groups, trade unions, professional groups and women's groups, whilst simultaneously choosing not to work with service-delivery organisations or political parties which contest for State power (Hansen 1996).

Not only do lists of organisations mask the actual processes of selection, but such lists also reveal little about the uneven power relations amongst those organisations or about the different values, ideals and norms prevailing amongst them. They potentially depoliticise the arena of association, celebrating its plurality and diversity, but clouding its political content. It cannot be assumed that because business associations, NGOs and trade unions all operate within the space of civil society that they have access to similar resources or share similar goals and values. Some bilateral donors and multilateral agencies may perceive any engagement with trade unions as contradictory to the policies of privatisation and deregulation that they are advocating. In brief, engaging with civil society can create the illusion of plurality and social inclusion, obscuring the ideological predilections, norms and values that underpin donor support to civil society

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12. For example DANIDA published its strategy for support to civil society in 2000. NORAD similarly has laid out principles and modalities for engaging with southern civil societies (NORAD, 2000). Both UK DFID and the WHO are currently drafting guidelines for working with civil society.

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and permeate social relations within civil society.

### *Identifying the Forces of Pro-Poor Political and Social Change*

Whilst support to pro-democracy groups may contribute to donor objectives of democratisation, it does not necessarily fulfil goals of poverty reduction. Activists in human rights groups, environmental organisations, legal reform groups and members of professional associations are generally urban elites, with relatively high levels of education and social connections with other social and politically powerful groups. For many, poverty reduction is not the key issue that fuels their activities. However, some may also have pro-poor agendas and values, advocating a redistribution of resources and policy attention to the interests of poor people. Pro-poor politics requires broad alliances and coalitions amongst politicians, civil society organisations, community leaders and political parties (Moore & Putzel 1999). The challenge for donors seeking to reduce poverty through, in part, engagement with civil society, is to identify the forces of pro-poor political and social change. Such a process of identification requires an initial analysis of local political economies, social structure, and politics. Though exercises in civil society mapping are a step in the right direction, they do not situate the myriad of organisations discovered in rapid consultancy processes within the broader social, economic and political context. Most donor agencies invest few resources in preparing their international field-staff for field assignments, let alone in understanding the intricacies of different political systems, local political histories and cultures. As a result most field-staff grapple in the dark, trying to make sense of the plethora of civil society organisations they encounter. More often than not, they rely on the choices made by their predecessors, leading to the constant re-circulation of favoured local civil society organisations.

Any initial social and political analysis needs to look beyond the limited range of urban, formal organisations, not least because social norms, political values and ideals pervade both formal and informal associational life. Maina (1998) argues forcefully that the donor privileging of certain urban civil society organisations leads donors to exclude other aspects of associational life which can be significant arenas for the articulation of political ideals and values. In contexts such as Kenya and Uzbekistan, where the legal and regulatory framework governing civil society organisations is restrictive, other spheres of association, such as burial societies, weddings, funerals, mosques and religious gatherings, can be significant sites for the exchange of views, circulation of alternative views and expression of dissent. Furthermore, such institutional loci of association may have far greater meaning for local people than formal organisations like NGOs. As Kasfir (1998: 7) states, « Many more Africans probably consider the so-called "primordial public realm", however unorganised it may appear to outsiders, as far more significant than the formally organised civil society promoted by scholars and donors ».

By promoting the creation and development of business associations, women's groups, human rights groups, service-delivery NGOs, donors implicitly define civil society as the sum of modern formal organisations, which contrast with ethnic, primordial, traditional organisations. This in

turn assumes that ethnic-based and primordial associations are somehow static and unchanging, privileging kinship and blood-ties over broader, « public » issues. Hence they cannot be engaged in processes of State accountability or democratisation, for they will always give priority to immediate particular interests over general concerns. However, as Maina cogently argues (1998 : 60), « Civil society is contextual, and the forces both of class and of kinship can animate its capacity to fight for and help root democracy. There can be no a priori assumption that only civil society based on non-kin ties can serve democracy ». The danger is that by ignoring such arenas of less formal association, donors fail to develop a nuanced and deep analysis of the forces of social and political change, and in particular of a pro-poor politics.

However, for donors to support particular kin-based associations is also problematic and politically sensitive. Rival groups could easily accuse donors of being in league with particular ethnic groupings in society. To pretend, however, that any selection of organisations does not involve a bias towards particular groups in society is to reinforce the notion that civil society, unlike the State, is somehow free of the influences of ethnicity, gender and class. The exclusion from view of ethnic and kin-based groups assumes that ethnicity, blood-ties, class and gender are somehow absent from southern NGOs, environmental groups and human rights groups. Moreover, the transfer of expectations about how organisations behave and the values they cherish can also lead donors to invest in inappropriate and/or ineffective agents of pro-poor change. Whilst NGOs in one context may play a role in promoting democracy or addressing the needs of the poor, in another context they may have no democratic aspirations nor any commitment to poverty reduction.

### *Dependency*

In many highly aid-dependent economies such as Bangladesh and Mozambique local civil society organisations are materially dependent on donor grants. Whilst the State has the legitimate authority to raise taxes and companies earn profits through sales, civil society organisations depend on raising revenue through membership fees, philanthropic donations, fund-raising activities, and State grants. The expansion of the non governmental sector in Western Europe in the late 1960s related in part to the existence of a welfare State providing benefits to the unemployed and low-paid, some of whom channelled their energies into charitable and quasi-political work. In southern contexts, however, extensive poverty renders it impossible for individuals to give regular or substantial support in time and money to civil society organisations, whilst the small size of the domestic bourgeoisie and the weakness of the State preclude reliance upon company donations or State grants. In such situations local civil society organisations depend, often crucially, upon support from donor agencies for their survival and expansion.

Whilst donor support makes it possible for local civil society organisations to hire staff, establish offices, organise practical activities, and network, it also creates its own tensions and constraints. Donor agencies have their own agendas, their own time-frames, their own goals and objectives which may not always overlap with those of local civil society

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groups. To the extent that donors can persuade local organisations to implement certain programmes and agendas, then there is the risk that local agencies increasingly lose sight of their own priorities, values and agendas. Furthermore, whilst the field-offices of donor agencies are under pressure from headquarters to deliver results within short periods of three or five years, the pressure to implement projects may force local civil society groups to move at a pace beyond their capacity. In doing so, they may be compelled to abandon other activities and goals which they value as of greater importance.

What is at stake here is the autonomy of local civil society organisations to define and sustain their own agenda, their own goals and objectives, their own priorities and values, and their own time-scale. Given that autonomy is a key defining feature of civil society, distinguishing it from both the State and the market, then the paradox in many southern contexts is that the overreliance on donor support erodes that very feature of autonomy. Furthermore, for civil society organisations to maintain their potentially critical function of checking the State and market, and indeed donors, then the preservation of such autonomy is imperative. Whilst donors may be strengthening civil society by supporting selected organisations, paradoxically they may also be hindering the development of local civil societies by undermining their autonomy.

#### *Elitism : Whose Civil Society ?*

Given the disparities within civil society and the greater capacity of educated elites to organise, a key challenge for donors committed to poverty reduction is identifying ways of supporting organisations of the poor, rather than organisations claiming to act on behalf of the poor, and of creating spaces where the voices of the poor can be heard. Donor engagement with civil society has a marked urban bias. In his study of Kenya, Maina (1998 : 159) finds that donor support is concentrated amongst a limited number of urban organisations. Fluency in English, social ease with foreigners, command of donor discourse and physical proximity to donor offices are significant influences on donors' choice of partner organisations. Whilst considerable support is given in Kenya to human rights groups, legal reform and pro-democracy groups, donors tend to neglect farmers' groups and community-based organisations, which are key elements of rural civil societies. Similarly, in Central Asia US donor agencies have tended to support environmental groups, human rights groups, professional associations, and democracy organisations, most of which are situated in urban centres (Howell & Pearce 2001 : 197-198).

By supporting predominantly organisations of urban elites, donors may inadvertently reinforce social inequalities, contributing minimally to the strengthening of organisation by the poor and the poor's capacity to articulate their concerns. Moreover, in establishing important alliances with pro-poor political and policy elites, donors may unavoidably become locked in particular elitist and clientelistic networks. The issue here is that such clientelistic ties steer donors towards particular sub-groups of the poor embedded in patronage networks from village level upwards. This then hinders the development of a generalised strategy to address poverty which is based upon the notion of the poor's rights to better health care, education

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and higher standards of living rather than upon the expectation of a gift provided by the State through patronage.

### *The Scourge of Universal Blueprints*

In developing programmes to support civil society donors tend to draw upon a particular normative imagination of civil society rooted in the historical experience and traditions of Western Europe and the USA. In effect they attempt to create civil society in their own image. Whilst the contemporary contestation of the idea of civil society reflects different ideological perspectives and divergent interpretations of historical experiences, the dominant image of civil society which donors transpose to southern and transitional contexts is a liberal-democratic version, which emphasises the oppositional and democratising role of civil society vis-à-vis the State and celebrates the associationalism of a modern citizenry able to regulate its own affairs. Furthermore, civil society is populated by particular kinds of organisations, which on the one hand reflect processes of modernisation and urbanisation, and on the other hand function to alleviate the inequities created and reinforced by the market. Symbolic of this blueprint model of civil society is the ubiquitous « non governmental organisation ». In transitional contexts such as Central Asia and the former Soviet Union establishing and fostering NGOs that resemble in form and function those found in the West is seen as basic to civil society strengthening programmes. NGOs are treated uncritically as a natural and integral component of a vibrant civil society<sup>13</sup>.

Yet the tension in operating with a universal blueprint of civil society, which privileges a particular developmental path, particular organisational forms, and particular values, is that it de-contextualises and depoliticises the idea of civil society. The very term « civil society » is not easily translatable into some languages. For example, in Chinese, there are various ways in which the concept can be translated, emphasizing alternately its urban character, its bourgeois nature and its oppositional purpose, alternatives which in turn have implications for the way the party-State responds to civil society organisations<sup>14</sup>. Nor can it be assumed that the historical trajectory shaping the development of civil society in Western Europe and USA can be repeated, or is a model par excellence to be replicated. As Hann & Dunn (1996 : 20-24) argue, it may be more useful to focus on universally shared values of trust, cooperation, and accountability rather than searching for a specific liberal-democratic version of civil society in all societies.

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13. In an evaluation of INTRAC's capacity-building work in Central Asia some rural and semi-rural NGOs explained how they had not realised they were NGOs until they encountered donors, whereupon they transformed their initiatives into the shape of NGOs and formally registered as such (INTRAC, 1999 : 10).

14. For a detailed discussion of Chinese discourse on civil society see Shu Yun Ma (1994). On the issue of implications for the party-State, a bourgeois interpretation of civil society would in the context of a State espousing a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology position the State against civil society organisations. An interpretation which emphasises the opposition of civil society to the state would likewise make the State suspicious of any non-state activities.

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This article has explored the political context underpinning donor engagement with civil society, highlighting the rise in the post-Cold War era of a new triadic paradigm of State, market and civil society. Following donors' discovery of civil society at the end of the 1980s not only has there been a discursive shift from NGOs to civil society, but donors also have modified their internal structures and programmes to support the strengthening of southern and transitional civil societies. Yet donor assistance to southern civil societies creates its own dilemmas. The material dependence of southern agencies on donors threatens to undermine the latter's autonomy to fashion their own agendas, goals and activities. The lack of any textured political and social analysis inclines donors to cooperate with urban civil society organisations and urban educated elites. Though alliances with pro-poor policy and political elites are important for promoting pro-poor agendas, any strategy towards civil society needs to be informed by a careful analysis of the agents of change in a particular context, and the political, economic and legal constraints within which they operate.

While this article has looked critically at actual donor practices and highlighted the actual and potential pitfalls of attempting to fashion civil society from the outside, it also suggests that donors need to look afresh at their attempts over the last decade to support civil society. To what extent has their support to civil society bolstered a pro-poor politics? What has been their goal in supporting civil society and how does this relate to their perspectives on the appropriate role of States and markets? To what extent have they provided space and resources for the poor to organise themselves and articulate their own needs? How much influence can and/or should donors wield in processes of social change? Addressing such questions implies shattering the illusion of the neutrality of donor interventionism and situating donor actions in a broader historical and political context.

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