

Fundamentals of Civil Society

Introduction

Civil society is not just about the development of community activity. It is also about solidarity and social inclusion. Through strengthening families, neighborhoods, voluntary associations and self-help groups, participation in such effort is building the idea of democracy and human rights from the foundations. Such a process can be genuinely empowering. The new groups may co-operate or clash, both with each other and with the state. Individuals and groups previously not acknowledged or recognized may now form themselves into associations to lobby for their cause, and also to educate or re-educate the general public about their needs.¹

The concept of civil society is essentially a framework for combating social exclusion and promoting social inclusion. Towards this end, it is aimed at:

Reducing dependency by strengthening the individual's relationship with public programs through increased involvement in community-based groups (non-government organizations - NGOs, not-for-profit organizations, private care agencies, religious organizations, etc.).

An emphasis on an appropriate welfare mix of government and non-government programs, for-profit and not-for-profit agencies, professional and voluntary benefits and services.

As such, the strengthening of the "civil society" it is not only about restructuring welfare, it is also about reviving the sense of social values, participation and communication (information, discourse, dialogue) that are prerequisites for a viable process of social protection and democracy.

Civil Society & Social Capital

"___ civil society consists of the groups and organizations, both formal and informal, which act independently of the state and market to promote diverse interests in society. Social capital, the informal relations and trust which bring people together to take action, is crucial to the success of any non-governmental organization because it provides opportunities for participation and gives voice to those who may be locked out of more formal avenues to affect change.

While individual groups form the building blocks of civil society, the concept's value lies in the extent and density of relations among groups as well as the synergy between civil society, state and market forces. Therefore, social capital is an integral part of civil society at the micro

¹ National Institute for Social Work (United Kingdom), NISW Briefings, Electronic Version, No. 18. Social Exclusion, Civil Society and Social Work. September, 1996.

and macro levels. Civil society is not a constant, rather it is continuously evolving and its roles vary in different contexts and at different levels of economic development.”²

Growth of Civil Society Organizations in Central and Eastern Europe³

There has been a major growth in the number of civil society organizations in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that are characterized as:

- 1) private or non-governmental,
- 2) not profit distributing,
- 3) self-governing, and
- 4) partially voluntary.

Excluding religious organizations, the nonprofit sector in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia is a nearly a \$1.6 billion industry that employs almost 173,000 full-time equivalent paid workers. In addition, an average of more than 26 percent of the population contribute time to nonprofit organizations equal to about 104,000 full-time equivalent employees.

What is the average composition of the nonprofit sector in the CEE? Culture and recreation compose 34.9 percent of the total. Followed by education (17.7%), social services (12.0%), professional (10.6%), health (8.3%), development (6.3%), environment/advocacy 6.1%), and 4.0 percent in other fields (p. 9).

Objectives of Enhancing Civil Society

- Promote social cohesion.
- Promote democratization.
- Protect most vulnerable populations.
- Reduce poverty.
- Build social capital.
- Prevent social exclusion from decision-making process.
- Reduce or control public expenditures.
- Increase local responsibility for social and health care services.
- Increase informal care (community and family).
- Increase individual and family self-sufficiency.
- Improve program accountability.

² The World Bank Group (2000). What is civil society?

<http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/sources/civil1.htm>

3. S. Toepler & L. M. Salamon. (1999). The “Rebirth of Civil Society” in Central and Eastern Europe: Early Maturity or Post-Partum Depression. Paper presented at the 28th Annual Conference of ARNOVA, Washington, DC, November 4-6.

Strategies Designed to Promote Civil Society

Social assistance (cash benefits, in-kind benefits).

Social insurance.

Decentralizing government.

Personal social services (child care, job training, skill development, life coping strategies, individual and family support programs, etc.).

NGOs.

Partnerships among state-local, private-public agencies, groups, and organizations.

Volunteers.

Civic organizations.

International initiative (ILO, UNESCO, EU).

The World Bank - NGO and Civil Society Unit

Web site: <http://worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/sources.civil1.htm>

Center for Civil Society International (CCSI)

Web site: <http://friends-partners.org/partners/ccsihome.htm>

Exercises

Discuss how GASS and NGOs are involved in the promotion of civil society as defined by the World Bank?

Identify any characteristics of the definition that may not fit well with modern day Albanian society, values, or government.

Examine the list of objectives and strategies in the outline and rank order them based on the Albanian experience. (Each participant should do this individually and then it should be done as a group exercise).

Identify the most practical approaches to promoting civil society in Albania (do not limit ideas to those listed in the outline).

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