

CIVIL SOCIETY: SOME THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

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1. INTRODUCTION

Following the economic and political liberalization processes that have been taking place in recent times, the notion of civil society has emerged as an important subject of public discussion and scholarly debate in many parts of the world. In an attempt to depict the emergence of civil society as an important actor in the local, national, and global levels, journalists and scholars are now using catch call terms such as 'global associational revolution', and 'power shift'. Various networks of civil society organizations (CSOs) from the local to the global level, are now engaging hitherto powerful and dominant institutions—national states, international organizations and business corporations - on various public issues ranging from the environment, international debt, international trade and investment regimes, poverty and sustainable development, etc. As a result of these developments civil society is increasingly being depicted as an emerging 'third sector' on its own right along side with the dominant institutions of the state (first sector) and the market (second sector).

The view that civil society is emerging as an important public sector is not limited to the developed and industrialized regions of the world where civic institutions have rather longer and solid foundations. In recent times, various types of civic organizations and networks of CSOs have emerged in many countries in Asia (especially in countries such as the Philippines and India) and Latin America. Africa is still considered to be the weakest link in the chain of the recent global revival of a strong and vibrant sector of civil society. However, it is generally believed that following the recent political and economic liberalization processes in the continent significant changes are occurring. There are lots of disagreements among scholars and observers about the various dimensions of the civil society phenomena in Africa. Due to the various uncertainties about the nature and role of civil society in Africa, scholars and observers who have hitherto focused on state and market processes are now giving increasing attention to the study of civil society organizations.

The notion of civil society is a highly contested concept. The prevailing idea is that civil society represents a public domain of associational life between the family and the state. Beyond this general idea there is no agreement on several aspects of the

included or excluded from the domain of civil society. It is rather to provide a general overview of the main approaches and issues often raised in the study of civil society. In this sub-section we shall briefly outline the various ways in which writers on the subject currently perceive the notion of civil society. In this regard there are, at least, two ways of conceptualizing civil society: In terms of its various ideal-type dimensions and characteristics and in terms of the image of civil society as a sector of society on its own right.

Dimensions of Definition

According to Bothwell (1997:1-3), there are three main approaches adopted by most writers in defining civil society. These can be characterized as the *attributes*, the *precondition/foundations* and the *composition* approaches, which are briefly discussed below.

The Attributes Approach: In this approach much emphasis is placed on the special attributes which animate civil society institutions such as trust, reciprocity, tolerance and inclusion. Additional characteristics often emphasized include peaceful dialogue, transparency, flexibility, etc. Taken together these attributes embedded in the networks of civic institutions constitute a given society's *social capital*. It may be noted that, currently, the notion of social capital has emerged as a key concept in the study of the role of culture and civic traditions in the development of civil society, democracy and good governance.

The Preconditions Approach: This approach emphasizes what we may call the foundations for the emergence and development of civil society, preconditions such as freedoms of association and expression, the rule of law, absence of war and violence, capable state, etc. These are, in other words, elements of an enabling environment for the development of civil society, which, ideally should be established and consolidated by a democratic state.

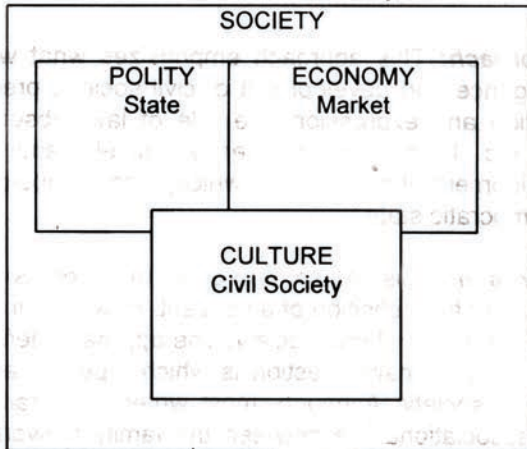
The Composition Approach: This is the approach that comes nearest to the conventional understanding of the definition of a concept. However, it is also the most controversial approach in the study of civil society. The approach defines civil society in terms of its composition. The main question is which types of associations and organizations belong to civil society. Although, most writers generally conceive civil society as a domain of associational life between the family network and the state there is wide disagreement concerning which types of associations and organizations are or are not part of civil society. The types of associations and organizations included or excluded from the domain of civil society by different writers are endless and sometimes contradictory. Hence it may not be useful to produce such a list here.

Civil Society as a Sector

It is becoming a common assumption to consider civil society as an emerging and important sector of society (both nationally and in global networks) alongside with the hitherto dominant institutions of the state and the market. A collection of normative approaches to development under the label Alternative Development are increasingly depicting civil society as an emerging third sector visa- a- vise the state (first sector) and the market (second sector). As Hettne metaphorically put it "To simplify one could talk about three main actors: the prince (First System), the Merchant (Second System) and the Citizen (Third System)" (1990:165).

According to a more sophisticated version of this approach, social life constitutes a 'threefold' system with autonomous but interacting sub-systems each with its own key institution. These are the economic sphere (the market), the polity or political sphere (the state) and the cultural sphere (civil society) (Perlas 1999, chapter 5, see Fig.1). Perlas develops and elaborates this model at length and in particular provides an elaborate exposition why civil society should be considered as a key cultural institution. Due to the importance such an imagery of civil society is currently gaining and its controversial nature we may briefly scrutinize its analytical utility.

Fig.1. The Threefold Nature of Social Life and the Place of Civil Society



First, according to Perlas the three spheres and their key institutions are analytically separate and autonomous but in reality there is no 'Chinese wall' between them. They engage in manifold interactions. The model does not imply that at this historical juncture all of the institutions possess equal power and impact; civil society is just an

emerging force and passing through phases of development. Depending on circumstances and the stage of development of civil society its relations with the other dominant institutions can be antagonistic, complementary or based on genuine and equal partnership.

Secondly, the institutional designation does not necessarily imply exclusiveness with regard to their roles and functions in society. For example, although civil society organizations are considered to be cultural institutions, it does not mean that they do not involve in political and economic issues. In fact, advocacy and engagement in public policy issues is and should be considered as the primary political task of civil society institutions. But such an engagement does not turn CSOs into political or economic institutions as long as they do not directly engage in political processes (i.e., compete for state power) or economic activities (produce goods and services for profit). In other words, civil society does not aim or attempt to replace the other dominant institutions or directly engage in their activities. Civil society organizations are cultural institutions primarily because they embody certain cultural and societal values and norms about the meanings and purposes of development (values such as cooperation, participation, equity, sustainability, etc). The primary aim of civil society is, therefore, to institutionalize its cultural and societal values into the economic and political spheres and hold in check the potentially authoritarian and monopolistic tendencies of the state and the market.

Thirdly, the model or the approach provides an additional analytical angle with regard to the individual/private and the institutional bases or dimension of civil society. The building blocks of CSOs are individuals and groups or in the language of civil society analysts citizens and citizen groups. With regard to the model under discussion the question is how can individuals and their activities be rigidly categorized into the threefold institutions of society. According to Perlas, individuals have the freedom and the flexibility to engage simultaneously or sequentially in all three spheres (i.e. involve in political processes and state agencies as citizens and employees and in the market as employees and producers, etc.). Individuals can also belong to or participate in civic institutions to pursue, with others, their common interests in the public arena with out much contradiction of principles and interests. A problem arises when we consider civil society organizations as organizations. According to Perlas, CSOs cannot simultaneously and directly engage in all of the three institutional spheres without a serious contradiction and conflict of objectives and interests that may ultimately lead to a break down. To avoid this condition an organization that seeks to undertake activities in other spheres should 'spin of' a separate organization to handle the task. In spite of the above clarifications some problems still remain. Where do organizations such as business associations, labor unions and co-operatives belong?

2.2. Civil Society in the African Context

It is often noted that African societies possess rich associational life dating back to the pre-colonial period (Bratton 1989:411). At the same time it was often argued that civil society in Africa is a weak and highly fragile construct, partly due to co-optation and repression by authoritarian regimes and partly because of the general socio-economic underdevelopment of the continent. The latter view reflects the general assumption held by many Western scholars that civil society flourishes in the context of a higher level of capitalist development and a strong middle class. However, there is the optimistic assumption that since the beginning of economic and political liberalization processes elements of civil society in the continent have undergone "both quantitative expansion and qualitative transformations in their organizational bases"(Eyoh 1996:55). The development of civil society is in turn expected to further consolidate democracy. Beyond the above mentioned general perceptions there are no agreements on several aspects of the civil society phenomenon in Africa (Marcussen 1996:13-4). There is no agreement even on the very question of which types of associations and organizations should be included under the category of civil society. To illustrate the problems involved in the analysis of civil society in Africa we can take one perspective on the subject. According to a leading scholar on civil society in Africa:

Civil society encompasses only a portion of what has become a complex associational scene. What distinguishes those groups incorporated in civil society from other associations is their partial nature. They are separate from but address the state. These networks do not attempt to offer solutions to existential problems (as do some sectarian organizations), nor do they seek to capture the state (as do some populist groups). They therefore occupy a conceptual—although not always locational—middle ground, nurturing both horizontal and vertical ties (Chazan 1994: 256, 278 as quoted in Marcussen 1996:16-

Chazan's exposition brings us to one of the major problems concerning the study of civil society in Africa. To reiterate, Chazan is in effect proposing to exclude two categories of associations and organizations from the domain of civil society in Africa. First, the so-called 'parochial', namely the different types of associations variously characterized as local, informal, traditional, indigenous community-based organizations. These types of associations should be excluded because, according to Chazan, their agenda does not go beyond the immediate concerns and the day to day 'existential' problems of their localized members which do not 'address the state'. Such associations are excluded from the realm of civil society in favor of intermediate associations and organizations that promote 'vertical and horizontal ties.' Secondly, what are called 'populist', namely religious, ethnic, regional, etc. associations and organizations. This category of associations should be excluded because they

promote 'sectarian' interests and they do not have a concept of the state independent of their own aims. These types of associations tend to fragment the public sphere and even attempt to capture the state. The 'populist' types of associations are excluded in favor of those associations and organizations, which presumably promote modern-universal values and ideologies, and in so doing they address the state and create a shared public sphere within which plural and 'secular' interests can be articulated.

These two categories, undoubtedly, represent the most prevalent types of associations in Africa. If so, what are the assumptions behind the procedure of inclusion and exclusion? Are the procedure and the assumptions behind it conceptually and empirically valid? What is the implication of excluding from civil society these most prevalent forms of associations in Africa? In relation to these questions we can only indicate a few points. First, the above exclusion and inclusion of specific associations from civil society is clearly based on the Western model of civil society.¹ Secondly, the definition of civil society is mainly based on what we may call an instrumentalist and normative bias because associations and organizations which promote political and economic liberalization and in so doing engage the state become by definition institutions of civil society. Thirdly and related to the above points, there is an implicit dichotomy between modern versus traditional and formal versus informal as the basis for including or excluding some associations in civil society. This is not the place to embark upon a detailed theoretical and methodological elaboration and critique on these issues. It suffices to note that the above assumptions and approaches contain several theoretical and empirical flaws some of which we may briefly mention.

First of all, the rigid division between modern versus traditional and formal versus informal overlooks the fact that some of the association and practices labeled traditional are as modern as African colonial and post-colonial modernity it self (a situation which may also apply to Ethiopia despite its non-colonial background). It can be argued that they emerged in adaptation or in response to the opportunities and challenges created by colonial and post-colonial modernity.

Secondly, the approach overlooks the intermeshing or what one writer characterized as the "continual synthesization" (Eyoh 1996:65) of actual social practices and institutional forms and the realities of social actors 'straddling' between the modern and the traditional, the formal and the informal, the urban and the rural worlds.

Thirdly, the dualistic and unilineal approach does not recognize the fact that the roots of some of the so-called formal and modern organizations in Africa can be traced to informal and 'traditional' associations. For example, due to restrictions imposed by colonial authorities the nucleus of present day labor and trade unions in many African countries were laid as mutual friendship associations among workers (a situation which may again apply to Ethiopia). Finally and most importantly, the inclusion and

exclusion of some associations and organizations from the domain of civil society on the basis of the above mentioned assumptions has the tendency of 'privileging' what we may call modern, professional, middle class, and formal associations. The danger of this approach is that it implies the exclusion of large segments of the population from the domain of civil society namely the urban poor (with or without associational life) and the rural world as a whole.

The above critical points do not of course resolve the problem of which types of associations and organizations should be included or excluded from the domain of civil society in specific contexts. Nor is the problem confined to the concept of civil society and its application in Africa as such. We encounter similar problems with regard to other social science concepts such as social class, the state, etc. However, our exposition is first of all intended to highlight the acute ambivalence faced. On the one hand, there is the feeling that the inclusion of all and every association in the domain of civil society will stretch the concept so much as to render it useless and empty of analytical utility and normative content. On the other hand, there is the understanding that excluding the so-called 'populist' and 'parochial' associations and organizations from the domain of civil society will narrow the concept so much and will render the concept unsuitable. Secondly, it reminds us of the need to transcend rigid dualistic approaches and explore theoretical and methodological tools, which adequately reflect the diverse and mixed nature of social practices and associational forms in our context.

2.3. Characteristics of Civil Society Organizations

The characteristics of civil society institutions identified here are ideal-type (i.e., which may diverge from the real world empirical reality) constructs gleaned from the literature. The main characteristics include institutional plurality, associational autonomy, voluntary participation and trust and solidarity. In addition, we will briefly raise questions regarding representation, accountability and legitimacy of civil society organizations as well as structural and functional differentiation and networking in the sector.

Institutional Plurality

The notion of plurality indicates not only the obvious fact of the large number and types of associations and organizations occupying the public sphere between the family and state domain but also the diversities of interests, objectives, organizational forms, capacities, etc of civil society institutions. In other words, civil society is not a homogenous entity. It is characterized not only by harmony and cooperation but also it is an arena of competition, contradiction and conflict. As Marcussen notes "Civil society is not a uniform and homogenous group of institutions. On the contrary, the institutions of civil society are a myriad of particular interests which have got an

institutional form or an institutional expression. They express conflicts, rivalries, and struggles – or consented action. They may act as integrating or disintegrating elements” (1996:25). As we have already noted there is no consensus as to which types of associations and organizations should be included or excluded from civil society in the African context, which makes the issue of plurality even more complicated.

Associational Autonomy

Autonomy is perhaps the most important but at the same time the most controversial characteristics of civil society institutions. Generally, autonomy refers to freedom and independence of civil society institutions to set their own agendas without the direct intervention or dictation of external forces. As we have said autonomy, like civil society itself, is an ideal-type construct. In reality, since civil society institutions exist not in a vacuum but in specific historical, political, socio-economic, ideological, etc., contexts their autonomy is circumscribed by these contextual factors. This is why it is often said that autonomy is relative and embedded—it is a matter of degree and subject to change positively or negatively. In addition to the state, civil society institutions interact with other organized social forces including other civic institutions—internal and external—which in one way or another circumscribe and limit the autonomy and capacity of these institutions. Being plural the capacity of civil society institutions also varies from one organization to another depending on the objectives and resources of the respective institutions.

Voluntary Participation and Trust and Solidarity

Civil society institutions vary from small membership organizations mainly engaged in self-help activities to large and medium scale ‘service organizations engaged in all sorts of service, development and advocacy activities. Accordingly, they exhibit differences in their style of organization, internal democracy, level of membership participation (active/passive), etc. The self-image of civil society institutions as democratic, participatory, accountable, etc thus needs a close scrutiny. However, voluntary membership and participation is the one of the most important characteristic and principles of civil society institutions. Authoritarian regimes have, of course, made a mockery of this principle by a blanket co-optation of whole organizations and their membership. Finally, trust and solidarity are the ‘invisible/intangible’ but important properties of civil society institutions. Trust and solidarity refer to the reciprocal mutuality and confidence individual members place on the reliability of the behavior and actions of others members and their organization. Trust and solidarity as foundations of associational life are expressed in their most simple and transparent forms in informal community based organizations—where these elements rather than external or officially binding legal rules keep these associations going. Trust and solidarity, however, do not necessarily imply the absence of competition and conflict in

associational life. As civic associations grow in size and complexity the face-to-face and primary basis of thrust and solidarity become diluted and assume a more abstract and remote character.

Representation, Accountability and Legitimacy

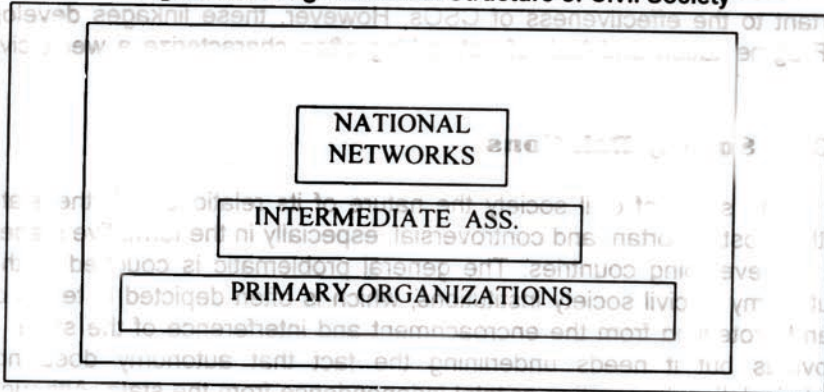
Civil society organizations come in all shapes and sizes. Some are membership organizations while others such as many local and international service and development NGOs are non-membership organizations resembling corporate entities. CSOs engage in all types of activities and advocate various policies mostly issue specific, often with out a clear and well-defined constituency whose mandate they can claim to represent. This means that in many cases the question of who CSOs represent and to whom they are accountable remain diffuse and ill defined. In spite of these, CSOs claim some advantage if not superiority over other state and market institutions on account of their alleged adherence to certain superior values and norms. All kinds of value- laden attributes are attached to or claimed by CSOs. However, as Khan noted: "state institutions operate within an accountability frame, which is, at least formally, well-defined. Whom are NGO policy advocates accountable to? Who do they represent? What sanctity attaches to the solutions they advance?" (1997:54).

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to the above questions. This is partly because a kind of tautological argument that CSOs derive their legitimacy from the type of values and norms they embody and promote (values such as sustainable development, democratic participation, flexibility, a grass-roots approach to development, etc) can be advanced. In general there is an important point which we have to take into consideration when we raise the issue of representation, accountability and legitimacy of CSOs. Theoretically, it can be argued that CSOs derive their legitimacy from being organizations for effective citizen participation beyond and above the issue of representation in formal democracy. However, the general and vague idea of representing and serving 'the people' is not sufficient.

The ultimate test to the efficacy of the values and legitimacy of CSOs rests elsewhere. The legitimacy of both individual CSOs and the sector as a whole seems to be related to the question of the credibility of the organizations and the activities they undertake (Marschall 1999: 172-175, Khan 1997: 54). This in turn implies a number of important issues. First, the plurality and diversity of CSOs means their credibility is also variable. This variability has significant implications for the sector as a whole because the deficit of credibility in one or a group of CSOs may have a significant repercussion for the image of the sector as a whole. This is an important issue which underlines the fact that credibility is a fragile and delicate commodity for civil society. Secondly however, credibility for individual organizations and the sector as a whole is

something that comes through a long process of accumulation based on the results achieved and the mistakes corrected.

Fig. 2. Ideal Organizational Structure of Civil Society



Structural and Functional Differentiation and Networking

The institutional plurality of civil society and diversity in objectives interests, organizational forms, and resources of CSOs raise issues of unity and cooperation in civil society. While institutional plurality and heterogeneity is part of the definition of civil society, it simultaneously raises the problem of fragmentation. In the language of civil society analysts, this is the question of networking and forms and dimensions of networking. In the short term networking implies cooperation in the exchange of experiences, information and resources among CSOs. However, in a long-term perspective, networking has an important strategic value especially regarding the relations of civil society to state and market sectors.

The issue of networking is crucial especially in the area of advocacy. Even if there are no systematic barriers to dialogue and engagement, the fragmentation of CSOs means that state authorities can not deal with a multitude of civic institutions individually in policy dialogue for obvious operational reason. Similarly, in the long run civil society organizations can not make meaningful and effective intervention and participation in policy advocacy in their fragmented state. Networking thus does not imply the loss of autonomy of civic institutions or the institutional plurality of civil society. It merely underlines that autonomy without strategic alliance can be a source of fragmentation and weakness for civil society.

According to Naidoo and Tandon (1999:10-11), networking in a strong and vibrant civil society sector ideally takes a three-tire structural configuration with corresponding

functional differentiation (see Fig. 2). At the base are a large number of primary organizations that are linked with other similar organizations upwardly in intermediate associations. The intermediate associations may in turn form national networks, which coordinate and provide support to the lower level organizations as well as being involved in policy issues with state and market actors. Horizontal and vertical linkages are thus important to the effectiveness of CSOs. However, these linkages develop through time. Fragmentation and lack of networking often characterize a weak civil society.

2.4. State-Civil Society Relations

Of all aspects in the study of civil society the nature of its relations with the state appears to be the most important and controversial, especially in the formative stages of civil society in developing countries. The general problematic is couched in the language of autonomy of civil society institutions, which is often depicted in terms of safeguarding and protecting from the encroachment and interference of the state. It may seem obvious but it needs underlining the fact that autonomy does not necessarily imply isolation, separation or total independence from the state. Although civil society and state are and should be analytical separate they are in reality heavily implicated in each other's constitution (Beckman 1993: 29; Mamdani 1996:15). We can not address the crucial question of the nature and character of state-civil society relations in this paper in a systematic and detailed manner it deserves. We can only raise a few points.

The Creation of Political Space: In its modern manifestations the notion of civil society implies the rule of law. Therefore, as the most inclusive and rule setting organization in modern societies, the state is expected to provide constitutional guarantees for freedom of association without which the modern notion of civil society is inconceivable. This does not imply that the state just 'grants' the freedom of association and the political space necessary for the development of civil society out of benevolent will. More often than not, it is the out come of protracted struggles and negotiations between societal forces in which the state participates. Even then, as paradoxical as it may seem the political space that civil society needs for its emergence and development ultimately needs to be guaranteed by the very state to which civil society is usually posed as a protagonist. Beyond this general understanding, the specific nature of the relationship between the state and civil society can not be determined a priori by theoretical fiat for all societies and times.

State-Civil Society Relations are not Static: The dynamic character of the relation requires a historical perspective. For example, certain historical moments of crisis and transition can create 'political opportunity structures' in which state-civil society relations can be dramatically activated and changed. In such historical junctures civil society institutions which hitherto seemed docile and compliant may make a dramatic

entry into the political arena. Following stabilization and the end of crisis and transition the scenario changes again. One general example is the period of the anti-colonial independence movement in Africa when civic organizations—labor unions, rural cooperatives, religious associations, etc.—served as the building blocks of the nationalist coalitions linking the urban and the rural world in the common struggle against colonialism (Bratton 1989:411). In the post-colonial period, however, most regimes came to view independent associations and organizations as potentially rival sources of power and influence and sought to suppress or co-opt civil civic organizations (see Mamdani 1990). This was done in the name of national unity and justified in terms of the 'ideology of development'. The recent pro-democracy popular movement in the continent in which civil society institutions played significant role is seen as another such historical moment. Another example can be derived from the events surrounding the 1974 Ethiopian popular movement mentioned in the introduction.

State-Civil Society Relations are not Homogeneous: Since civil society embodies plurality, we can not generalize its relations with the state a priori and in a uniform manner. It varies from one institution or sector of institutions to another depending on the objectives, approaches and mutual perceptions with state authorities. However there is, for example, the assumption that unlike more conventional service and development oriented organizations, those civic institutions engaged in the promotion of sensitive issues such as human rights and the rule of law may get into antagonistic and acrimonious relations with the state (Bratton 1989:429). In any case, Bratton argues that instead of pre-judging the nature of the relationships between the state and civil society we should adopt a more flexible analytical framework involving situations ranging between "disengagement versus engagement" (1989: 428). In general and taking a static perspective we can identify from the literature four broad dimensions of state-civil society relations and these include: (1) legislative, regulative, and encouragement; (2) cooperative or collaborative; (3) advocacy and opposition; and (4) autonomy or independence dimensions.

2.5. Democratization, Decentralization and Civil Society

The nature of the relationship between democracy, civil society and development has been the subject of longstanding debate in the social sciences and development studies. It is to be recalled that in its hay day in the 1960s modernization theory held as one of its major axioms that democracy and civil society are the byproducts of socio-economic development and affirmed the role of the state in development. This axiom has been dramatically reversed in recent times. According to the currently dominant view democracy and civil society are no longer to be viewed as long term outcomes of development, they are on the contrary the essential preconditions for development. A detailed discussion of the various perspectives and inconclusive

debates on the subject is beyond the scope of the present paper (see Leftwich, 1994, 1995, White 1995, Eyoh 1996).

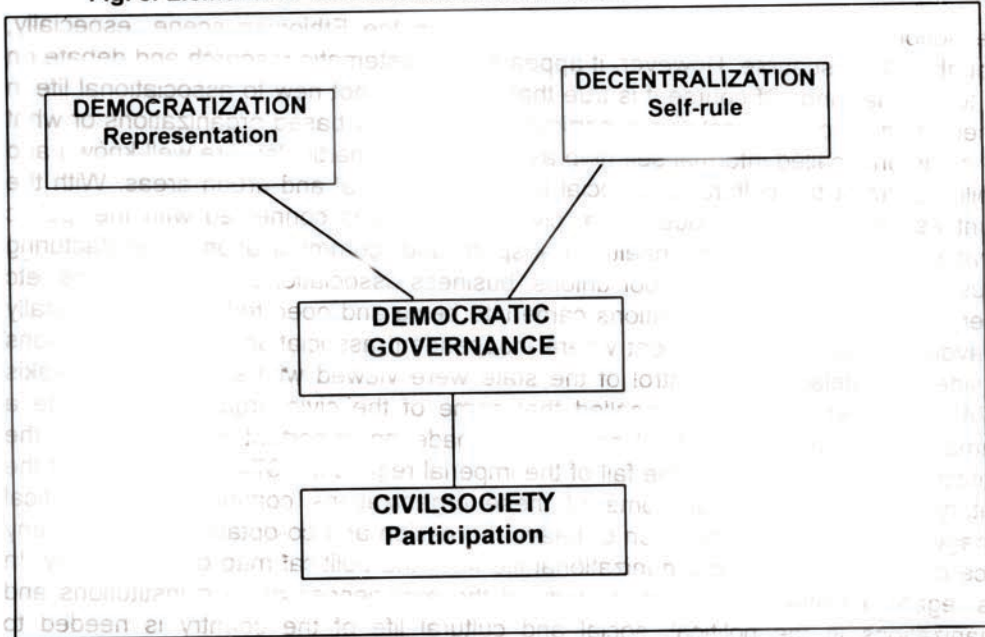
It has often been noted that formal democracy without effective self-rule at regional and local levels constitutes a partial political reform. Similarly, formal decentralization without democratization at the local and regional levels tends to merely reproduce 'decentralized despotism' (see Mamdani 1996). Generally speaking, the main elements of formal democracy and decentralization are representation and self-rule respectively, which constitute some level of popular participation through periodic elections. However, it can be argued that formal democratization and decentralization do not necessarily imply effective and continues popular participation in public policy decision making processes.

The question of effective popular participation in decision making process and the organizational basis for such participation in democratic and decentralized settings has not been fully explicated in much of the debate on the subject. Currently the debate is couched in the 'populist' notion of 'empowerment'. As we have indicated in the introduction the idea of empowerment embodies three elements namely organization, community awareness and self-management of social projects and activities. It can be argued that civil society (as networks of civic organization acting in the public domain) can be seen as one of the organizational basis for popular participation in policy decision making processes. In this way theoretically civil society (with the element of participation/empowerment) can be viewed as complementary to the representation element in formal democracy and the self-rule element in decentralization in a full reform scenario towards democratic governance (see Fig. 3). In other words, as noted by White state-society relations have two basic dimensions namely:

First, the constitutionally defined realm of formal political, administrative and legal entities which set the institutional framework of a democratic regime and, ... Second, the informal and formal organizations and channels which connect politicians, officials, and agencies with social constituencies in 'civil society' (1995: 32).

These dimensions can be characterized as the 'exterior/electoral' and the interior/consultative' arenas respectively. The interior or consultative arena is often neglected but it is equally if not more important as far as state-civil society relations and the role of civil society in democratization processes are concerned. White further argues that "the nature and impact of democratic political institutions are heavily influenced by the character and behavior of organized groups in 'civil society': their heterogeneity, their capacity to coalesce and the nature of their relationship with parties and states" (1995:33-34).

Fig. 3. Elements of Democratization, Decentralization and Civil Society



The above discussion represents an ideal theoretical scenario. In real life situations the complementarity between the elements of democracy, decentralization and civil society noted above is not self-evident or free of rivalries and conflicts. This is because neither the state nor civil society is a homogeneous entity. It should be emphasized that civil society can not be taken as a homogenizing replacement for the various divisions and conflicts (be it class, ethnicity, gender, etc) between social forces in society in which the state has a prominent role to play. The plurality of interests and objectives of civil society organizations means that it can not be assumed that all such organizations promote democratic aspirations or they can be effective in promoting democratization processes. Thus the basic point is neither to idealize or glamorize civil society (and its role in democratization and development) nor to dismiss it in toto but to study 'actually existing' civil society in its specific historical contexts (Mamdani 1989; 23, 1996: 13-14).

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The notion of civil society has also appeared on the Ethiopian scene, especially, through NGO discourse. However, it appears that systematic research and debate on the topic is lacking. Of course it is true that Ethiopia is not new to associational life in general and civic organizations in particular. Community based organizations or what are commonly called informal self-help associations, in particular, are well-known and familiar parts of the cultural and social landscape in rural and urban areas. With the country's entry into the modern era, civic organizations connected with the 'public service nexus' (education, health, transport and communication, manufacturing industry) such as trade and labor unions, business associations, student unions, etc emerged. These civic organizations came into being and operated under a generally unfavorable political environment where independent associations and organizations outside the tutelage and control of the state were viewed with suspicion (Markakis 1974). However, it is to be recalled that some of the civic organizations made a dramatic entry into the political scene and made an important contribution to the political upheaval that led to the fall of the imperial regime in 1974. In the wake of the military's seizure of power some of these organizations continued their political engagements until a combination of heavy repression and co-optation destroyed any trace of independent civic organizational life from the political map of the country. In this regard a historically informed study of the experiences of civic institutions and organizations in the political, social and cultural life of the country is needed to highlight the opportunities and constraints such associations and organizations face in the current historical phase.

Since the EPRDF regime came to power in 1991, it has embarked upon controversial economic, political and administrative reform processes. The major elements of the reform process included the introduction of formal democracy, decentralization on the basis of ethnic federalism, and market based economic liberalization. In spite of the controversies surrounding these reform processes, it seems that a measure of political space is opening up for the emergence of various types of civic organizations. Earlier, following the repeated drought and famine conditions faced by the country, relief and service oriented local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have established themselves as important component of the non-governmental sector in the country. More importantly, new and less familiar types of civic institutions are also cropping up in more recent times. These are what we may call 'advocacy' oriented civic organizations engaged in the promotion of diverse public issues including: human rights and the rule of law, democracy, gender, environment, popular participation and sustainable development, economic and other policy issues, etc. In addition, given the officially sanctioned role of 'ethnicity' as the basis of political and administrative organization, regional and 'ethnic' based development associations are becoming increasingly common. In view of these developments, it is increasingly becoming necessary to open up debates and conduct empirical research on civil

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society in Ethiopia. It is hoped that the various theoretical issues raised in this paper, including those on state-civil society relations will help stimulate research and discussions on the subject.

NOTE

¹ The Western conception of civil society, especially its liberal version, has two major and interrelated foundations. The first one is the abstract idea of the legally free and autonomous individual—i.e. freed from so-called primordial/particularistic local ethnic, religious, regional, etc affiliations—and the implications of these conditions for the relationships between the individual and the social, the private and the public, the particular and universal dimensions of social order. This in turn was a product of a combined historical process of the creation of the nation-state and a wide array of citizenship rights (see Seligman 1992). These are clearly not the ideal typical scenarios prevailing in many contemporary African societies and hence the dilemmas encountered in applying the concept of civil society in the African context.

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