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A South of Peoples

The launching of the World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre in 2001 was the culmination of a process of articulation, coordination and expansion of a vast array of anti-globalisation NGOs based in both the South and the North. Indeed, while the ‘battle for Seattle’ marked the Northern NGOs discovery of the South and its perspective and issues, the onset of the WSF process was important in defining the position of the South vis-à-vis the key features of the contemporary international system as the NAM summits and its precursor in Bandung were during the Cold War. In the first instance, the WSF reflects the dynamics of change within the South, most especially the rise and diversification of civil society which itself is linked to the increasing economic development and opening of political space within Southern countries. Representing a range of interests from environmental groups to social development organisations, Southern civil society has developed positions and outlooks based upon its assessment of the impact of the changing international system upon its states and societies. In the context of broad international jamborees such as the WSF and the UN’s World Summit on Sustainable Development, Southern NGOs have sought to distinguish their concerns from those of their colleagues in the North while at the same time actively using these settings to build coalitions with like-minded Northern NGOs. At the same time, the relative proximity of some Southern NGOs to their governments – or, in some cases, the gap between the two entities – raised the issue of their status as collaborators or critics of sitting regimes. This underlying tension which at times was manifested as political pressure, coupled to the pecuniary needs of these organisations, is a theme that continually highlights the sensitivity of the issue of national sovereignty and the concomitant difficulties facing civil society in the South.1
This chapter will briefly examine the origins of civil society in the South; its development and influence, especially with regard to the role of policy networks in influencing approaches of states of the South in the international arena and the setting of a new global agenda for the South.

6.1 Origins

The origins of transnational Southern civil society reside in economic and social changes within states and the concurrent rise of technological innovations in the communications field. Rapid economic growth and development in selected states, led by the newly industrialised economies of East Asia (but a phenomena which found its counterpart in South America), had given rise to an enriched consumer society whose ambitions, outlook and interests echoed their middle-class brethren in the North. Urbanisation and industrialisation both played a part in fostering conditions for the development of civil society. Once predominantly agriculturally based societies, with the accompanying clientist and tradition-bound networks, the massive population movement to the towns and cities brought about a restructuring of individual’s relations with work and community as well as a redefinition of self. The urban environment presented a host of novel challenges to migrants, some of which fostered a drive on their part to organise or join existing social groups and institutions. In some cases these groupings were ethnically, kinship-based or confessional in nature; in others instances, they were rooted in employment concerns and, exceptionally, openly political in character.

Trade unions and religious organisations, which scholars have traditionally identified with civil society, were a critical feature of most anti-colonial and liberation struggles in the South. Nonetheless newly independent leaders were increasingly ambivalent about civil society, recognising in it a force which could as easily be mobilised to challenge their authority as it had been used against their predecessors. The labour movement, with its roots in the productive activities of industry and agriculture (and its potential links to international communism), was always a controversial within the South irrespective of a government’s ideological shade. For example, while trade union activist Tom Mboya’s work in Kenya was as critical to securing independence as Jomo Kenyatta’s equivocal position on the Mau Mau, in the aftermath of independence Kenyatta’s ‘market friendly’ policies increasingly alienated the labour movement. Mboya’s attempt to mobilise labour interests into a political force were cut short with his assassination and