The Emerging Global Civil Society: Achievements and Prospects

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The phenomenon of civil society organizations

Global CSOs have emerged as a response to the deficiencies of global governance, of a ‘gap’ left by states and international organizations in representing public concerns and interests of citizens (Scholte 2000: 281 ff.). Governments often show a lack of adequate attention to ‘global concerns’, like environmental degradation, the depletion of natural resources needed also by future generations, epidemic illnesses, preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity, global warming, human security including food security and water security. Increasingly, citizens do not feel adequately represented at the global level, where no parliamentary institutions exist. Critique addressed to the United Nations exemplifies this trend. There appear to be certain imbalances in the international agenda, namely neglect of developmental and environmental concerns and of the social dimension of international economic relations (Weinz 2000: 94ff.). The main deficit of global governance, however, derives from the preoccupation of governments with short-term national, mainly executive interests, leading to the neglect of long-term global concerns. International public goods tend to be neglected also by private economic interests. One reaction was the organization of public interests through CSOs as non-state actors (Thürer 1999: 37 ff.) representing an emerging global civil society.

Definition

This raises the issue of the definition of civil society. It should also be clarified, whether civil society organizations as non-governmental organizations can pursue any kind of legitimate private interests including the pursuit of profit as do business corporations or whether this categorization should strictly be limited to organizations pursuing public interests. For the purposes of this contribution, civil society organizations are understood as non-profit organizations, based on the right to associate, that pursue primarily public policy interests by private means. In this way they are distinguished from corporate
or business organizations, which are for-profit and pursue primarily private interests, and from inter-state organizations like international organization, which pursue public interests by public means. In practice the distinction is often blurred as CSOs may also pursue economic or private interests and business associations or corporations may also promote public interests as shown by the corporations committing themselves to respect the ten principles of the Global Compact.

**Forms and functions**

Civil society is covering a public space which is different from the state or the market. It is focused on the human person, its development, security and rights. The state can set framework rules, but is supposed to respect the autonomy of NGOs, which is a precondition of their proper functioning. A possible way of distinction can be found in the functional approach, which allows delimiting the space of civil society versus business and the state. Typical CSOs are human rights NGOs, environmental NGOs, peace and conflict resolution NGOs, consumer organizations, etc. In this chapter, the terms CSOs and NGOs are used interchangeably as it is common practice, but the focus is on NGOs acting as CSOs in the public interest, which also corresponds to the terminology used by the United Nations (UN).

There is a large plurality of CSOs, which mainly results from the diversity of their purposes and the heterogeneity of their approaches. The variety of NGOs can be seen from the many functions they pursue, which is reflected also in the acronyms in use for certain groups of NGOs like PINGOs, i.e. Public Interest NGOs, TANGOs, i.e. Transnational Advocacy NGOs, etc. Some governments have tried to bring NGOs under their control or to establish NGOs which pursue governmental interests. This has created a problem of independence reflected in organizations called GONOGOs, i.e. Government-sponsored NGOs, or QUANGOs, i.e. Quasi-NGOs. Finally, NGOs are not only used by civil society, but also by ‘uncivilized society’ as a convenient form to cover networks of organized crime. Such NGOs are called CRINGOs, i.e. Criminal NGOs. These various types and practices call for quality control, which can be achieved through various types of regulation as will be discussed later in the chapter.

The participation of CSOs as actors in new forms of global governance (Benedek 2005b: 257ff.) has resulted in more inclusive and participatory approaches. Global CSOs contribute successfully to international ‘agenda-setting’, to advocacy of public concerns, and to challenging the lack of accountability observed in international organizations. International NGOs are increasingly taking part directly or indirectly in negotiations of agreements like the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (UNDP 2002: 122). They can perform an *amicus curiae* role by writing briefs for the attention of WTO panels and the Appellate Body. They may enjoy consultative status with ECOSOC and be invited to meetings of informal groups and networks like the