

Organised Civil Society: Redefining our Role and Relevance



OK, Morgan, many governments and businesses are proving incapable of facing the growing crisis and are contributing to its escalation. So, what does this mean now for civil society now?

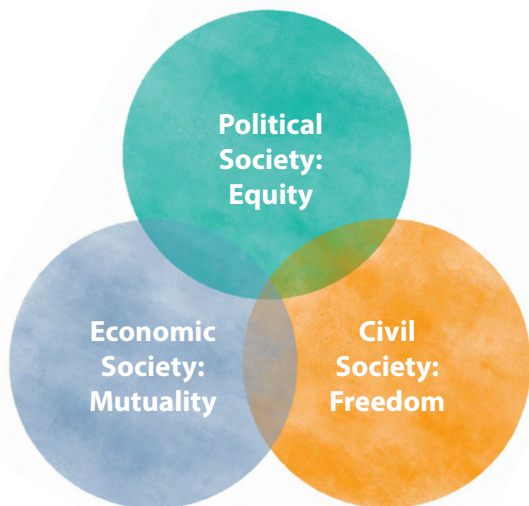
That's the big question, Manu. In this chapter we throw the spotlight on civil society and how we might begin to respond out of our core values and capacities to step up our role in catalysing, facilitating or supporting social change. We should not give up on government and business because without them nothing will change. But we need to learn to engage them differently.



We begin with a perspective on larger human society itself, on its shape and the fundamental roles of its actors in the spheres of economic, political and civil societies.

The Threefold Nature of Society

Human society can be seen as a dynamic, threefold relationship between three interacting and overlapping spheres of **political, economic and civil societies**, each with an ideal, essential role in society to fulfil.



THE THREE SPHERES OF SOCIETY: THEIR IDEAL QUALITIES AND PRIMARY ROLES



Political Society: Ensuring *Equity*. Governance for equity, justice, entitlements and security through law, human rights and regulation. State Institutions.



Economic Society: Cultivating *Mutuality*. Economic well-being through environmentally sustainable production, distribution and consumption of goods and services. Business and the Market.



Civil Society: Fostering *Freedom*. Vibrant and free participation of citizens in civic and cultural life, expressing the deeper voice of community. Informal and formal local, national and international organisations.

These three spheres do overlap in places, where, for example, civil society may also provide economic development services or advocate for political change, or where businesses wield political power from out of their economic power etc. But each sphere has distinctive powers and unique societal roles to play, whether creatively or destructively.

Nicanor Perlas, a Filipino activist, makes the case for the importance of the creative tension between these three spheres for the healthy development of society. He views civil society as the “cultural sphere” of society, concerned with “the development of full human capacities and the generation of knowledge, meaning, art, ethics, and a sense of the sacred. Culture is the realm that gives identity and meaning, that represents the deeper voice of community. This is the realm that develops the full human potential of individuals and organisations and enables them to be competent participants in the economy, political life, culture, and society at large.” (Perlas, 2000) Civil society organisations thus play a unique and deeply humanising role in the development of society.

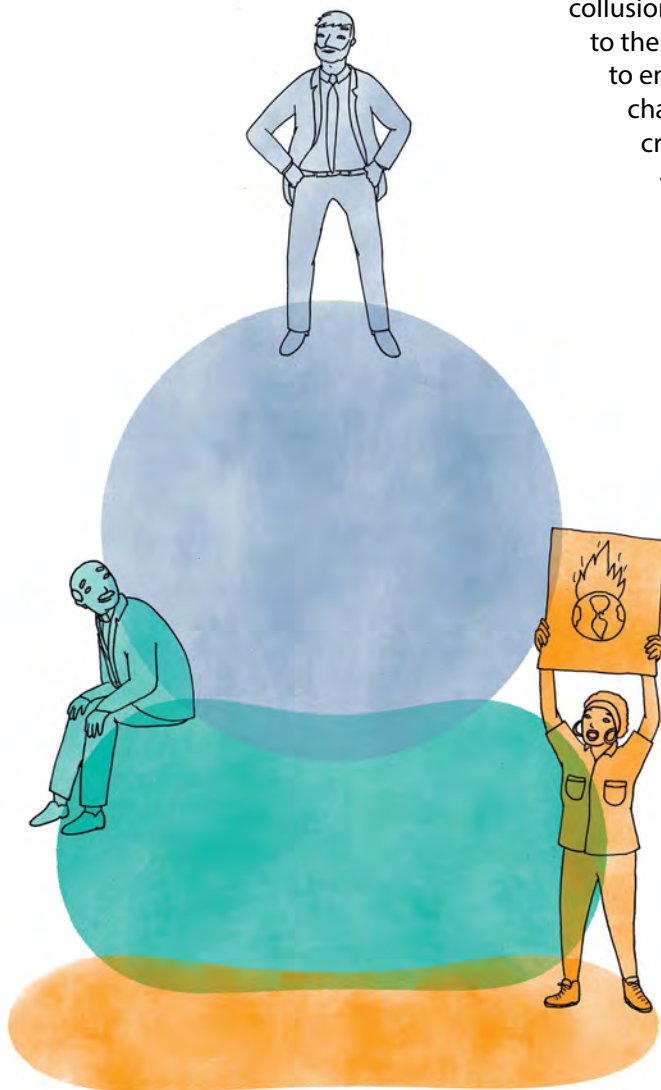
“

People are not passive bystanders. There may be a shrinking of space for civil society, but this should not be confused with shrinking civic impulses and civic forces for change.

Creative and destructive forces in society come alive where the three come together in their attempts to challenge and shape each other. If, for example the State is failing to foster or defend the institutionalisation of equal rights, for which it is primarily responsible, then civil society may step forward to prompt it to do so, as it does. Human history provides telling accounts of this dynamic relationship between these sectors.

In recorded history these spheres have always been out of balance. Early slavery and feudal-based societies were dominated by political society and then later, slavery and colonial, capitalist-based societies were dominated by economic society and its imperatives. This continues today with the domination of economic society, creating a more severe and growing imbalance between these spheres, resulting in the kind of crisis and dysfunction we currently experience. The dominance of the corporations and their profiteering through crass capitalism and their collusion with a supplicant political society, leading to the further exclusion of the most marginalised, to environmental degradation and climate change, is all coalescing into the existential crisis we all face today.

Yet, paradoxically we have seen, in response to this imbalance, a rise in the mobilisation and power of civil society on an unprecedented scale. People are not passive bystanders. There may be a shrinking of space for civil society, but this should not be confused with shrinking civic impulses and civic forces for change. The threats to civil society these days have come precisely because it has started to grow, to find its feet and become a challenge to the powers of economic and political interests.



The many forms of organised civil society

Civil society contains a vast array of organisations, from small to huge and from the very informal to the very formal. In this Guide, these are the kinds of organisational forms of Civil Society that we write about:

Community-based Organisations (CBOs). These are largely voluntary, often informal, and usually a neighbourhood response to local issues, accountable to their members. CBOs sometimes connect with each other to take on common campaigns or even to form wider social movements. Some may attract funding and start to formalise and even morph into NGOs, though at risk of losing their original mission. Their strength comes from being strongly rooted in authentic community.

Social Movements. Active citizens organising around particular issues form social movements, running initiatives like campaigns to use their collective power to seek more systemic social change. They may be coalitions of smaller CBOs or local movements. Also accountable to their members, they may operate locally, nationally or even internationally. They can form strategic alliances with other actors to enhance their power and some even enter into integrated change programmes with government and business, as equal partners. Their strength also comes from being rooted in community with the power of numbers behind them.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs). These are more formal, professional, funded entities, often accountable to a Board of Trustees and required by the state and donors to be registered. Like social movements they may take local, national or international forms. Their strength lies in having a consistent, professional practice, able to offer reliable support to programmes of change, including social movements.

Coalitions, Alliances and Campaigns. These are usually temporary organisations bringing together a variety of actors, like social movements and NGOs, around specific common foci, be it around a particular event or issue to advocate for progressive policy or to win or defend a particular right.

NGO Platforms. These are associations of NGOs that come together to build common capacities, to defend common interests or to advance the common agendas of member organisations. They usually take on a national form and can, like Forus, be an international platform of platforms. We also speak of **networks** which is used interchangeably, referring to platforms or groups of CSOs formed to pursue collective goals that may be short or long term.

