

**Civil society as a metaphor for western liberalism**

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## **Abstract**

The concept of civil society has become one of the most used tools both in theoretical discussions and in policy formulations. Its aspirational content in general presents an abstract idea of people's action without elaborating its particular applications in various contexts. This paper looks at one such context. It aims at analysing the particular usage of the concept in the development discussions by international donors/policy makers such as the World Bank. It adapts an anthropological understanding of the metaphor analysis framework to uncover the context and meaning implicit in the particular language of civil society organisations used by the World Bank and other similar agencies. It links the particular language back to the socio-political context from which it has emerged, to argue that the usage of civil society organisations in the specific context of development implies a normative rethinking of social relations within developing societies. The argument suggests that it is this normative approach to civil society which is an attempt to realign social relations within developing countries parallel to the western liberal model of social arrangements between state, market and the third sector. The paper then discusses the short term implications on already existing civil societies and long term implication on societies in general.

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# **Civil society as a metaphor for western liberalism**

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## **1 Introduction**

Although the idea of civil society has been around for a long time and used in diverse contexts it has, by no means, one meaning or one reason for its deployment. The concept has been applied in various forms. The idea of civil society has been used to explain both the active role of people in changing the regimes in Eastern Europe at the end of 1980's and, in a more recent use of the term, the attempt to bring people into the development process in Africa, Asia and elsewhere. In the former case it is usually used to explain the active part people played in the creation of social change in a society whereby it denotes a space as well as an action taking place in that space. In other words, it maps an experience observed for our understanding. In the latter it denotes an aspirational formation to enable people to act for themselves by attempting to *build civil society* or *strengthen* it. This maps an intentional situation, based an experience elsewhere, onto a target context. Beyond its common aspirational positive connotation in terms of people, civil society, is arguably used to describe an existing situation as well as a desired policy outcome.

It is in this multiple employment of the concept that the precise meaning implied in various usages become conflated to mean something about people's action. In this reduction of multiple contexts into one aspirational ideal, the context specific understanding of civil society remains unarticulated. Therefore, the implications of using civil society as a lens based on opaque aspirational understanding for policy interventions could produce unexpected consequences for those who are ascribed to be in a civil society. It is with this concern that the present essay will look at the usage employed by particular international organisations in their dealings with the developing world.

In this essay first, I will argue that the language of civil society organisations used by particular international organisations in the context of development is a metaphor. By analysing the concept as a metaphor, I will be able to trace the genealogy of the concept and will argue that the concept reflects the particular separation of the social context from the political as observed in de Tocqueville's study of the US. It follows that in its use, the concept provides this separation as the normative frame for understanding. Moreover, the metaphor requires this normative framework to be able to engage with various parties, hence in its use through policy recommendations in the development context, it becomes an agent of transformation. Then I will suggest that the relationship between particular international institutions and civil society organisations in the development context is a process within which a particular form of social relations, a western neo-liberal one,

spreads. I, therefore, argue at the end, that the attempt to bring people into development as suggested in the reports is not a technical issue of *dealing with people and their organisations* but a socio-political process creating a new organisational culture based on the Western sectoral divisions, which would eventually transform social relations without much deliberation with people in a given context.

The essay aims to clarify what is implied in the particular usage beyond generally assumed positive aspirations implicit in the concept. It will focus on the particular usage of the concept of civil society within the development context by international organisations. Therefore, it will not focus on a discussion of whether the context free ahistorical aspirational understanding of the concept is useful or not as an analytical tool. Here the concern is the deployment of the concept in the particular language of *civil society organisations* by international policy makers. In order to unpack this language and to understand the implied meaning beyond the veil of ahistorical aspirational form, two reports published by the British Department for International Development (DFID), *Making Government Work for Poor People* (2000) and by the World Bank *World Development Report 2000/2001*, will be analysed. The main aim here is to focus on the unpacking of the concept of civil society used by international organisations to understand the ideational intentions that are legitimating their usage. Therefore, the following discussion is about what particular language means. Although institutions like the World Bank and DFID are used to discuss the case, it is the official language employed to express their interests in the civil society rather than their internal decision making dynamics that is under scrutiny. The essay takes issue with the official language.

In order to go beyond the obvious meaning of the concept, the essay will ask about the usage of the concept (Wittgenstein, 1997) at this particular juncture. In other words it will try to analyse the language as a process that indicates a social activity that requires a particular social and cultural context. In order to engage with the concept in this manner the essay will consider civil society as a metaphor which maps an experience ‘from a source domain to some target domain’ (Lakoff, 1987, p. 276). The former domains are those familiar ones which provide us with conceptual tools that are recognisable and comprehensible, while the latter is the domain that is less familiar and less concrete within which these source domains are deployed to produce consequences.<sup>1</sup> The analysis will take the usage of the concept of civil society by international organisations as a metaphor linking two domains of understanding, both of which could be possible from a particular social and cultural context. By looking at the language of civil society as a metaphor used by international development organisations, the analysis will reveal what the concept tends to produce in its application.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Lakoff ‘the metaphorical mapping that relates to Idealized Cognitive Models (ICM) define relationship between [/among] the senses of the word, [where] the sense of the word in the source domain will be [viewed] as more basic’ (Lakoff, 1987, p. 417).

The next section will look at the theory of metaphors as it will be utilised in this study, and then it will analyse the usage of civil society in two documents and try to trace the source of the particular understanding of civil society used in them.

## 2 Metaphor

### 2.1 Conceptual background

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *metaphor* as ‘the figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989, p. 676). Beyond its nature of being a figure of speech, I will look at metaphors as productive linguistic tools that influence actors and action in their usage. By attempting to understand civil society as a metaphor in its each deployment, beyond its meaning as a master narrative of an aspirational condition, the aim is to understand the cultural context within which its use is embedded. Then, the attempt is located within a view of metaphors as culturally located productive processes. This framework allows the essay to engage with the concept of civil society as denoting a particular social and cultural process rather than having an ahistorical meaning. This perspective of looking beyond *the figure of speech* makes possible to analyse the usage of civil society metaphor as a *contextual process of interpretation with transformative effects* on its targeted domain. This mode of analysing historicizes both the usage of the metaphor and its impact. It allows us to give the concept of metaphor a dynamic process and use it as an analytical tool at various levels which will be discussed below.

Beyond its aspirational meaning, in its many uses, civil society conveys a certain understanding of a relationship, that attempts to map a way of looking at social relations, which is based on the experience of those formulating the concept. At the end, when the concept is used as a metaphor it implies what is suggested by Aristotle as ‘an intuitive perception of similar in dissimilar’. However, the intuition that combines dissimilar experiences is based on a particular experience *of the observer using the metaphor*, therefore, it is an understanding of similarity of situations that is not including the context that is being observed. Similarly, the process of intuiting is not referring to a previously hidden similarity but actually producing it. In other words the usage of a metaphor reflects a form of life that gives meaning to the intuition, as suggested by Ludwig Wittgenstein in *language games*. He argues that “‘language game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life’ (Wittgenstein, 1997, p. 11). Each way of speaking *a civil society* then reflects a way of distinct life and relations particular to that life. It means that the understanding of civil society then is distinctly located at a particular juncture of the usage or performance of civil society (Todorov, 1982).

By looking at metaphors as productive processes the definition of metaphor is further qualified. It will be enriched by several perspectives coming from anthropological studies on metaphors. James

W. Fernandez suggests that one of the important contributions of the anthropological perspective is its emphasis on the importance of ‘culture in the formation of metaphoric models with which various peoples reason’ (Fernandez, 1995, p. 9). With this it is possible to move beyond George Lakoff’s emphasis on the centrality of metaphor as a technical device in ‘the development of individual understanding and in the evolution of human intellectual capacities’ (Quinn, 1995, p. 58). Naomi Quinn suggests that rather than being central to the process of understanding by supplying ‘the understander with heretofore unconsidered entailments drawn from the metaphorical source domain’ metaphors are ‘selected to fit a preexisting and culturally shared model’ (Quinn, 1995, p. 60; also see p. 76). This point is strengthened by Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney. She argues that a metaphor as a categorical form, that is an independent form, does not exist. Words or concepts become metaphors ‘when used and/or interpreted by particular actors, in a particular context, both social and historical’ (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1995, p. 160). Therefore, the production of meaning by metaphors is dependent on the intentionality and the social context of the user. According to Quinn, metaphors are productive insofar as ‘metaphors are selected by speakers...just because they provide satisfying mapping onto already existing cultural understandings’ (1995, p. 65). So the argument is about the productivity of a metaphor within a given, already assumed, understanding rather than creating a *sui generis* understanding. Although these discussions question the productivity thesis, it is argued that as metaphors become accepted they ‘take on more, and deeper, ‘life’, that is deeper and more central meanings’ (Turner, 1995, p. 129).

Turner further qualifies this position by suggesting a constant relationship between a metaphor and its conventional domains. It is a relationship based on a degree of entrenchment of a metaphor within a given context of understanding whereby a metaphor could become instrumental in reorientation of an understanding. This is a dynamic move to look at metaphors within the culture in which they are used. It suggests a continuous reconstitution of social understanding as a movement between a metaphor and its domains in response to changes in context. Although Turner’s emphasis is on the reconstitution of ‘new or distinct contexts of cultural meaning and subjective consciousness’ (Turner, 1995, p. 129), the importance of Ohnuki-Thierney’s reservation about cultural specificity of potential reconstitution is important. Turner’s emphasis on the context dependent transformation of a metaphor to a domain, and vice versa, is an informative contribution to the present study. For aspirational civil society as a master metaphor could be seen as representing such a movement and entrenchment which has become a domain in itself. In resistance to such entrenchment and its ordering of social relations by a *trope maker*, Durham and Fernandez aim to define or redefine relations ‘within existing metaphoric domains that also configure relations between participants in a discourse’ (Durham and Fernandez, 1995, p. 208).

Therefore, by looking at one of the usages of civil society beyond this master metaphor in terms of its cultural specificity that produces meaning, the aim is to, first, explore those implicit meanings hidden



in the particular usage but also, second, to challenge the perceived fixity of the idea implicit in the metaphor. Durham and Fernandez argue that in transferring meaning from source domain to target domain metaphors enrich, transform, constitute and create ‘our understanding of the target domain’; in this reordering of the target domain metaphors operate according to their own structural and contextual background, as they have meaning in a particular system of meanings and ‘associations’ (1995, p. 192).

## 2.2 Application to civil society

The present study benefits from the above analysis in several ways. Looking at a metaphor as a product of culture within a specific social and historical context, allows me to look at civil society from a specific perspective to challenge its universal usage. It is the specific culturally located linguistic form which expresses, constitutes and reorders understanding of a target domain for those who are located within that linguistic framework, or who are of that culture. In other words, the metaphor of civil society, ‘language-game’, makes sense, explains, elaborates certain meaning only to those who can make sense of its source domain. As a tool of communication it connects two domains in the assumed meaning of the civil society without making its assumptions explicit. Therefore, one of the most important implications of this is that, used as a metaphor, civil society can have a transformative impact in those social settings outside its cultural domain. This is a point to which I return towards the end of the essay.

In the process of communicating a certain idea of civil society through its metaphorical use, the aim is to bring two domains together, albeit, under the understanding of the user’s context. According to Ted Cohen by using the metaphor an invitation is sent to the other side to participate. Cohen suggests that this is an attempt to create *a community* through the acknowledgment of similarity, however, it is also suggested that ‘the receiver needs to realise that the expression is a metaphor and must figure out the point of the expression’ (Cohen, 1979, p. 6). This is a critical point for the present study. Though the metaphor of civil society sends an invitation, it is not clear that the receiver understands the point of the expression beyond its aspirational format. As the metaphor does not carry an explicit expression of what it signifies, the receiver is invited to accept it on the basis of its aspirational signification while the sender has an understanding of its deeper social and cultural signification (Wittgenstein, 1997, pp. 6–7).

The above analysis of metaphors provides the essay with several analytical tools:

- a) The idea of metaphor as a relationship between two domains where source domain provides familiar conceptual grounding-intentionality, mapping/transferring a meaning from a context,
- b) It is culturally located, particular to a context
- c) It is a dynamic process of constituting meaning through a certain use-possibility of denaturalising an entrenched meaning by looking at a process,

- d) As an invitation to create a community around certain use-socially and culturally transformative process.

It is with these perspectives and tools that, next, I will engage with two examples within which the usage of *civil society organisations* shows a peculiar understanding linked to the aspirational civil society as the organising concept. Despite this link to the organising concept, the particular usage in question substitutes the embedded aspirational meaning of civil society with a new one without replacing the central aspirational aspects. It is by questioning this implicit replacement that the obviousness of the meaning is challenged and destabilised to understand what the concept of civil society means in this particular usage.

### **3 Civil society organisations as a metaphor**

#### **3.1 Official usage**

The two examples that are used here, the British Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank, present a commonality with other organisations which could have been used instead. Their usage of civil society is similar to that of wide ranging organisations that are in similar positions. First I will demonstrate the way civil society is employed in the examples. Second, I will analyse this usage as a metaphor.

In a recent consultation report DFID has formulated a set of new strategies for making government work for poor people (DFID, 2000, p. i). The report sets aims for alleviating poverty in the developing world by bringing people into the development process. The report also considers the role of national and global civil society in achieving its goals. One of the aims set is ‘strengthening the voices of civil society in developing countries’. In this churches, other faith groups as well as human rights and women organisations are given as the location of these voices. The NGOs from the developed countries are included as important agents in this process. The meaning of civil society in this text is ambiguous while a privileging of an organisational understanding of civil society is implicit. Despite the mentioning of ‘other parts of civil society’ the argument takes organisations and associations as the locus as they are assumed to speak on peoples’ behalves (DFID, 2000, chapter 8). An attempt to clarify the ambiguity of the usage, definitively, is given in the glossary to the report where the concept is defined as:

All civic organizations, associations and networks which occupy civil society between the family and the state except firms and political parties. And who came together to advance their common interests through collective action. Includes volunteer and charity groups, parents and teachers associations, senior citizen groups, non-profit think tanks, issue based activists. By definition, all such civic groups are non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The NGOs which come together under the banner of global civil society to campaign on globalisation related issues constitute a sub-set of broader civil society (DFID, 2000, glossary).

This definition illuminates the ambiguity without being too different in its emphasis from the other definitions used in the development field. For example, the Centre for Democracy and Governance unit in the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) defines the concept for its operations as ‘non-state organisations that can act as a catalyst for democratic reform’ (USAID, [Programs and Operations Assessment Report 12], 1991). Another example is the World Bank usage to which I will be focusing next.

The World Development Report 2000/2001 is focused on issues of poverty and fighting poverty (World Bank, 2001). In the report civil society is mentioned on several occasions. It, first, emerges in an early chapter dealing with the proposed *A Framework for Action*. Civil society, together with market mechanisms and the private sector, is seen as one of the providers of provision to complement the state’s role (p. 38). A framework that is enabling seems to suggest a set of rules and regulations that would allow associations of poor to increase their ‘voice and improve their circumstances’ (p. 110; see also p. 109).<sup>2</sup> It is in this particular discussion that state and civil society are seen as supporters of such associations by providing technical assistance, skill building, help in scaling up their membership, range of functions and political engagement. The report goes on to stress the role of NGOs in this process. In concluding the chapter on *Making State Institutions More Responsive to Poor People*, the report stipulates three ways of achieving this. The last of these argues that ‘strong civil society organisations can promote political empowerment of poor people, pressuring the state to better serve their interests’ (pp. 99–112).<sup>3</sup>

The next chapter on *Removing Social Barriers and Building Social Institutions* clarifies the usage of the concept. This chapter analyses the ways of establishing social institutions in a multiplicity of contexts by looking at several different social issues such as ethnic conflict and gender divide in various contexts. It is argued that foundations for links between socially fragmented societal groups can be made by ‘civil society organisations and the state’ (World Bank, 2001, p. 128). In this, the state is given a priority as it shapes the context and climate in which civil society organisations operate (p. 130). It is then argued that creating more accessible formal institutions helps poor people articulate their interests to those in power more clearly, confidently and persuasively. In the last chapter of the report, *Reforming Development Cooperation to Attack Poverty*, the Bank develops its tripartite co-operation scheme. The necessity for co-operation, in delivering aid, between state, civil society and the private sector is strongly emphasised in dealing with poverty in individual country contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> The role of the state is emphasised in creating enabling an environment for people to overcome poverty.

<sup>3</sup> The use of civil society, in this chapter, remains rather ambiguous and unclear as no elaboration of the concept is provided to make it clear whether the report is talking about a space or an organisational relationship in terms of civil society.

### 3.2 Analysis

Initially, if Lakoff's definition of a metaphor is the basis of our understanding of the particular usage presented above, one could easily conclude that civil society is used as a metaphor in mapping certain actions between two domains. In this mapping the clearest transferred meaning between two domains is that of people *doing things* for themselves. It is mapped onto the development process where people have not been seen as actively taking part in their own future. In other words people need to voice their will to change their own lives. This would be relevant with the aspirational ahistorical civil society metaphor which expresses an understanding of a positive relationship among people themselves and in their relationship to a state, either in opposition to it, or in co-operation to get benefits from it (DFID, 2000, p. 25). It is reasonable to argue that in most of the discussions of civil society, at least in the recent ones, this positive mapping of people's will is a common feature. From this perspective the mapping produces and projects a stable and fixed meaning that conditions our understanding. The relationship between civil society, i.e. people working for themselves, and development, then, would make sense in relation to both reports. However, in this limited fashion civil society can only reveal a fixed ahistorical aspirational meaning. The transformative invitation implicit in the policy recommendations, based on decentralisation and multi-sectoral partnerships in the social reorganisation of communities, would escape our attention.

It is clear that in the reports civil society organisations come to mean and probably to replace the civil society as an aspirational metaphor. For example the World Bank Report talks about 'removing barriers to pro-poor associations and offering them technical and other support to scale up their activities' (World Bank, 2001, p. 108). Furthermore the report talks about difficulties faced by the poor in 'forming associations' and urges governments to provide assistance in the creation of pro-poor associations and in 'scaling up their membership, range of functions, and political engagement' (p. 110). This associationalism is targeted to create the ground work for new social institutions 'civil society organisations and the state can do much to lay the institutional foundation for groups to co-operate for the common good' (p. 128). In other words, civil society organisations are incorporated to the policy recommendations as one of the architects of creating more institutions in their own image to help 'poor people articulate their interests to those in power more clearly, confidently, and persuasively' (p. 130). Thus, civil society organisations underpinned by an implicit associational idea arguably become a metaphor for civil society itself. The intentionality implicit in these policy formulations suggests that the idea of civil society that is evident is more than a figure of speech. It carries a particular purpose and it is based on a particular idea which exceeds the aspirational form discussed earlier. Therefore, the present discussion needs to take a step to understand metaphors as a productive mechanisms as previously suggested in relation to 'meaning-context-process-transformation' perspective in the anthropological approach. This would strengthen our understanding by revealing what the metaphor of civil society in this particular context is. That is,

how it has become an organising principle and what concepts are being communicated as implicit normative conditions in its deployment.

The metaphor of civil society organisations is not a coincidence or an accidental construction. It is produced within a particular cultural context and it fits certain understanding of a civil society (Quinn, 1995, p.58). It is clear that the reports posit a particular relationship between civil society organisations, the market and the state for the effective governance of people and their issues. Furthermore they explicitly attribute an already decided role to the civil society organisations. The emphasis on the distinct sectoral divide points out a particular understanding of civil society that is also observable in the discussions of non-profit sector developed by Lester Salamon and Helmut K. Anheier. They locate civil society and civil society organisations between the state and the market as a third sector or non-profit ‘sector’ in modern society (1996; see also Salamon et al 1999a and 1999b).

The DFID report, in its *Executive Summary* clearly argues that the international development targets could be reached faster ‘if governments focused on [seven key capabilities] and worked in partnership with the private sector and civil society’ (DFID, 2000, p. i). This model is highly similar with the one outlined in the World Bank report as a tripartite co-operation scheme for governance in an attempt to reform development. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that the reports share a cultural model that is grounded in a shared context. It is this background which provides the source domain of the metaphor. Put differently, within the shared experience that creates a society, the metaphor makes its appearance as a comprehensible relationship between people’s will and its expression in a space ‘between state and the market via an associational form’ (Carothers and Ottaway, 2000, p. 9). This source domain mapped onto the development process, by using the already fixed sectoral model, whereby a societal development participated by people, is indicated through the existence of either non-governmental organisations or other voluntary *advocacy* groups (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000, p. 295).

The relationships implicitly expressed in the metaphor of civil society organisations are clearly comprehensible within the experience of the actors formulating it. The metaphor, then, does not reflect a reality ‘out there’ within its target domain. It reflects the intentionality of the actors by satisfying a culturally shared experience underpinned by a certain meaning. The meaning that is shared in this understanding broadly takes the form of a link between the people and their contribution to the democratic process. It is this understanding that legitimates the mapping implicit in the metaphor that creates the understanding of the role of *the people* participating in the development process. The metaphor, then, does not produce a new understanding for the actors formulating it, but remains within the already understood relationship (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000, pp. 293–94). This relationship, as clearly used in the reports, assumes a model in which the participation of the people is demonstrated by the associational density that exists within a postulated

space between the market and the state. The density or the large size of this associational realm is considered to be positive for a well functioning democracy. In the language of the reports, non-governmental organisations represent this density, and thus, the relational matrix and its positive outlook are directly mapped onto the development process.

The sectoral/organisational bias of the metaphor is the condition of its social and historical context. The larger context of the sectoral policy recommendations of the reports witness to and assert these contexts. The usage of civil society organisations therefore, alludes to a particular set of activities and a particular form of life, *pace* Wittgenstein. The metaphor of *civil society organisations* reconstitutes the understanding of social relations in terms of organisational arrangements to make them more meaningful for those who are using it. In other words, in the language of the reports the metaphor constructs a meaningful relation in terms of the context it assumes for the associational agencies. Before I talk about this productive process and its consequences, I want to turn to the implicit social and historical context that makes the metaphor meaningful for the context of agencies.

### 3.3 Contextual lineage

In the last section I argued that the intentionality that produces the concept of civil society organisations as a metaphor represents a particular understanding of a form of life which is acted out in a certain relational context. The experience of this context justifies the usage employed by the agencies and gives meaning to it. In this section it will be argued that the implied importance of civil society organisations to assist state and the private sector, in representing the participation of people to a better development process, suggests that the context which makes this postulate meaningful is broadly Western, and in that, takes a particular American form. The postulate is not merely a statement of organisational structuring but also implies under which conditions such structuring is possible. It attempts to reorient the understanding of relations within a society on the basis of a blue print implicit in the metaphor which would eventually transform existing social relations in a given society. The section will look at Alexis de Tocqueville's observations and descriptions of the socio-political process that established the structural parameters of social relations in the US. It is from these relations that the roots of the tripartite governance system proposed in the reports can be discerned. This analysis will take de Tocqueville as a historian observing a society rather than a political theorist who is establishing a normative template for associationalism. This interpretation differs markedly from the discussions used by neo-Tocquevillians to support theories of social capital.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway argue that in the context of aiding democracies around the world, the US has found funding civil society as one of the most effective ways to pursue its policies.

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<sup>4</sup> For neo-Tocquevillians see for example, Putnam et al, 1992; and Taylor, 1990.

The reason for this was not only because of the context of civil society in the US which has a long history of civic engagement. It was also because the newly emerging organisational forms around the world were more conducive, as they appeared to be more reform-oriented and small in size, to the sorts of changes perceived to be necessary for a healthy democracy by the US (at the level of states would have been too costly and the motivation was lacking in large bureaucratic structures) (Carothers and Ottaway, 2000, pp. 7–8.). It is assumed that the involvement in civil society ‘will, in time, improve the quality of government’ (Casaburi et al, 2000, p. 508).

Although this analysis is partially relevant, it needs to engage more with the context of the civil society in the US. As the volume edited by Ottaway and Carothers demonstrates, the US funds are targeted to those associational forms which can be identified on the basis of an organisational understanding of a civil life underpinned by the American context. This is only one part of the process. The other part, as the reports suggest, is a reconstitution of social relations which creates the possibility of organisational identifiability through the application of new development strategies. Therefore it is a dual process, while funding those civil society organisations that are recognised as relevant, it also reformulates the space of civil society. The World Bank’s and other similar organisations’ funding and consultation relations with civil societies around the world suggest that civil society organisations and mostly NGOs are taken to represent civil society (Nelson, 2000, p. 417). It is clear that principles of engagement with civil societies reflect an assumption about the role of civil society organisations and their location in terms of both people and other governance structures in a given ‘well functioning’ society. This perspective suggests that the American source domain is used to articulate particular policies on civil society. It implies *contra* Carothers and Ottaway, that the American tradition, as observed by de Tocqueville, has an important explanatory power to clarify the conditions of its emergence, as these conditions are perceived to be instrumental for a ‘well functioning’ associational life that is used as a template to establish relations with civil societies around the world. These conditions are also important to assess the transformative impact of the overall governance structures advocated by the reports.

De Tocqueville’s attempt in *Democracy in America* is to record his observations in America in terms of its social life and both the political and institutional sources of that life. The attempt is to understand *the benefits* that a democratic system might bring (de Tocqueville, 1969, p. 13), as de Tocqueville argues that France has already experienced the ‘the ills it entails’. He does not directly credit democracy with a positive image. The book provides us with an extremely detailed account of life in America under a democratic system. The present focus will highlight parts of this study to understand the following statement clearer as the link between the concept of equality and the necessity of association is a crucial one:

If men are to remain civilized or to become civilized, the art of association must develop and improve among them at the same speed as equality of conditions spread (p. 517).

With these words de Tocqueville's discussion of associations in civil life in America ends. It is in the juncture of the possibility of equality under a democratic regime and its consequences in terms a social process that de Tocqueville's emphasis on associationalism becomes meaningful beyond its merely positive image. In arriving at this statement in *Democracy in America* he elaborates the major distinctions between a democratic regime and an aristocratic one. One of the central themes of this particular aspect of the book is its focus on the natural spread of equality in a democratic regime.<sup>5</sup>

The equality, according to the Tocquevillian argument, could take many shapes: one can be equal with others under a tyranny or, in extreme form, it is possible that equality merges with freedom.<sup>6</sup> The concept of equality is constantly separated from that of liberty (de Tocqueville, 1969, p. 504). These two concepts are discussed as related but not as one conditional on the other to exist. According to Claude Lefort, these disjoined concepts demonstrate a firmly drawn line 'between the social state and the political institution' (2000, p. 37). This distancing becomes much more important as the more discussions of equality take place within the social sphere. For example, it is argued that 'in ages of equality, every man finds his beliefs within himself, and ...all his feelings turned on himself' (de Tocqueville, 1969, p. 506). In the chapters on equality and its relation to the democratic process it becomes clear that liberty as a political process connects people to the larger issues, while their social equality creates unlinked people. As equality breaks down the old system of social relations by replacing the duty to your own relations with a duty to the larger political system, 'devoted service to any individual' becomes 'much rarer' (de Tocqueville, 1969, p. 507):

As social equality spreads there are more and more people who, though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands (p. 508).

This process creates individuals who are equal but unconnected. De Tocqueville clearly shows that the aristocratic regime provided social links in addition to political connections of an individual in one structure of belonging. Considering the discussion of expansion of equality and individualism while liberty connects people to the larger political structure, de Tocqueville seems to be pointing out that the modern system delinks the social and the political. The relationship that defines the polity is established through the political linking of each individual to the system of governance that

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<sup>5</sup> *The equality of conditions* in understanding the development of social relations and the American democracy seems to be central to de Tocqueville (1969, p. 9).

<sup>6</sup> It is argued that equality becomes delirious when an old regime collapses with the social ranks it has created 'the passion for equality seeps into every corner of the human heart, expands, and fills the whole...by this blind surrender to an exclusive passion they are compromising their dearest interests; they are deaf'. See de Tocqueville, 1969, p. 505).



represents the will of the people. The legitimacy of the government, as de Tocqueville argues, is in constant contestation to reduce the potential of the *tyranny of majority* (1969, p. 192).

It is in this connection that that he talks about the rights for association whereby individuals come together on their own initiatives to support public or private issues (de Tocqueville, 1969, pp. 189–90). He discusses the political associations as a way of establishing a system of checks on the political order while recognising that the rights of association of this kind derive from the legal structures of the United States. Therefore, their claims and contestation remain within the limits of the political system (pp. 194–95). This argument clearly implies that legitimacy of the system is constantly questioned through the associations created within the social realm. It also points out that individuals have a freedom to associate in the social, independent of their political involvement in the political associations as they become more specialised and institutionalised.

The associations are a necessity as the society becomes more individualistic with the spread of equality. The political structure creates reason for people to come together by creating reason to be interested in ‘the management of minor affairs’ it would be possible to ‘convince [them] that they constantly stand in need of one another’ (de Tocqueville, 1969, p. 511). Although the social is the location of the activity, the sort of activities people are involved with could be seen as locally institutionalised political activities delegated to ‘each part of the land’ (p. 511). In this, the political instinct allows associations to be built. Democracy, then, does not only create the separation of the political from the social but also creates the reasons for people to associate in the political despite ‘the instincts which separate them’ in the social (p. 511). For associationalism in the social de Tocqueville suggests that:

Democracy does not give the people most skillful government, but it produces what the ablest governments are frequently unable to create: namely, it spreads throughout the social body a restless activity, a superabundant force, and an energy that is inseparable from it, and that may, however unfavorable circumstances may be, produce wonders (p. 252).

The progress of democracy causes people to look after themselves (see p. 251), as individuals are weaker and the governments do not provide enough links, association becomes an imperative, people ‘would find themselves helpless if they did not learn to help each other voluntarily’ (p. 514). It is clear that dealing with the isolation in the social life is much more important as this sphere represents people’s ‘commonest and bare necessities’ (p. 515). In this section on *civil life* de Tocqueville’s separation of the political and the social is central to the discussion. As democracy naturally spreads equality whereby people are individuated, it also means that individual needs and necessities vary widely among them. Not only can the political structure not respond to this, but it should be not involved in responding to as it can only subsume various needs under the general will of the majority. Therefore unless people with similar needs create associations, individuals will suffer. The link between government and associational life needs to be minimal for this space to be beneficial for

people, it is even more so for the economic relations, as government ‘is incapable of refreshing the circulation of feelings and ideas among a great people, as it is of controlling every industrial undertaking’ (p. 516). The distancing of the government from the social life and economics becomes more pronounced in the demonstration of the sources of associations in civil life. The common interest of the individual *men* becomes stressed in trade relations as people need to rely on each other (see p. 520). It is out of these relations that the individual gradually learns the ‘the idea of association’ in the civil life (p. 520).

It is against this background that the statement quoted earlier makes sense. People need to learn the art of association otherwise as individuated people they need to exist alone. As the old linkages are broken down, there is no other way to survive in the midst of de-linked individuals that are looking constantly after their own interests. According to de Tocqueville, then the associational life arguably is the net result of the form of American democracy whereby the political and the social are separated. The political has linked to the popular idea of sovereignty exercised by the government in a limited way while people are left to establish their own links in the civil life. As a result, people need to learn to work together for themselves in the civil life. The individual initiative and resulting associations are undeniably in the centre of the civil life. In fact, without association there does not seem to be much of a civil life among individuals.<sup>7</sup>

It is then reasonable to assume that the associational density, which creates a civil society, is the net outcome of the socio-political framework in the United States. The model which creates this density is based on distancing the political from the social whereby the government becomes distanced both from economic and civil life. It is out of this model that the emergence of a particular associational life constructed in the form of voluntary organisations seem to have emerged.

### **3.4 Why does it matter?**

De Tocqueville’s observations about the emergence of associational life as the outcome of the troubles of the modern system, constitute the context within which the metaphor of civil society organisations is meaningful. It is in this understanding that the language of civil society organisations become the sign of a civil society (Wittgenstein, 1997). The metaphor signifies an idea of civil society where a particular form of associational civil life is the outcome of a particular judicial and political system. Therefore, it becomes much clearer that the metaphor of civil society organisations is not referring to any aspirational civil society or to one that may actually exist in developing societies. It is referring to a particular form of civil society where governments are reluctant to take part in the social realm, and it is identifiable with the particular associational life in which individuated people need to re-establish social links. As a metaphor in the reports, it not only assumes this particular context of separation of the social from the political implicitly, but, also as a

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<sup>7</sup> Arguably it is still the individual interest that is driving to associate as these needs cannot be satisfied otherwise.

basis of policy recommendations, it invites the receiver to produce and reconstitute the understanding of civil society in this image. The Tocquevillian analysis allows us to see this juncture between the implicit normative ideal of associational life in the metaphor and the organisational changes built in the reports which would allow such normative public space to emerge. It shows that the civil society aspired to in the reports could only be an outcome of the particular reconfiguration of the role of government and the market in a neo-liberally oriented three sector model. The reports propose a certain arrangement between the political and the social whereby governments become involved with the development process as long as they create an enabling environment for civil society organisations and the private sector. In considering what is an essentially political rearrangement as a technical process the context of reports reiterate the usage of civil society as a metaphor for neo-liberal institutional arrangements that require socio-political reconstitution of social relations. As a result it is reasonable to assume that the metaphor, not only tries to grasp relations in a unknown society in the image of a certain neo-liberal sectoral template, but also opens up the space for transformation of civil societies according to this template.

The metaphor communicates an implicit image of civil society based on a public space populated by associational links. Hence, by using this metaphor, reports would have a transformative effect on the social relations of the development context. The context of building civil societies or strengthening the existing ones is only a production of a space through the reconstitution of social relations between people and between people and their governance structures (See DFID, 2000, pp. ii, 2, 4). As the reports invite and urge people to participate in the development process to build a civil society, the aim is to motivate associational links for people to be able to deal with their problems, while strengthening civil society is more about helping already existing associational links. It is clear that in both cases the existing associations and those newly established ones need to work within the neo-liberal sectoral arrangements. Both cases are an invitation to participate in a larger community of similar societies that are benefiting from the processes of globalisation. By accepting the invitation of the metaphor to participate in development, the receiver also rhetorically takes a step to become a part of a larger community. In accepting the invitation of the reports, the receiving parties set out to change the social map they are inhabiting to establish the sectoral template. It is to this process to which I now turn.

#### **4 Metaphor as the agent of change in the short term**

Do not suppose that metaphors are always for communal insights. Some of the most instructive examples will be ones in which intimacy is sought as a means to a lethal and one-sided effect (Cohen, 1979, p. 10).

Considering the particular usage of civil society organisations as a metaphor, I have argued that the usage that dominates the reports is a process of mapping by transferring a culturally specific experience of a civil society model into a general understanding of the concept of civil society. As a

result of this process, the idea of civil society becomes one of signifying a well defined social relations reflected in the sectoral governance model promoted in the reports. Although this process enables the institutions to make sense of the contexts they are unfamiliar with, it is not only a heuristic tool for understanding. This section will focus on two related changes that would be the result of the application of the metaphor: the immediate short term consequence of reconstituting a civil society; the long term impact in the society is considered in the concluding section.

The short term impact of the metaphor has already been observed by the commentators focusing on the relations between NGOs and the World Bank and other similar organisations such as USAID. It is suggested that the World Bank and other organisations are working only with those NGOs that are recognisable with their understanding of civil society organisations (Howell and Pearce, 2000). The criteria for recognition would typically include 'principles of self-regulation, individualism, and voluntarism' (Casaburi, et al, 2000, p. 508). Using a seemingly social criteria rather than a political one allows the World Bank and others to claim that their involvement with the civil society organisations are technical in the sense that they are assisting to create or strengthen capacities for people. Those civil society organisations participating in consultations or in civil society projects are also expected, within this technical approach to initiate certain internal management strategies such as methods of accountability, evaluation, monitoring etc. The organisations identified on these principles are, then, considered to represent the people's interests and to have 'potential to organise broad participation' (Nelson, 2000, p. 409). However, the assumed participation based on seemingly technical criteria could be politically dividing and only reflect part of the social map in a given context (See, for example, Abramson, 1999). Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid demonstrates this problem in relation to USAID's funding relations in Egypt. He stresses that USAID attempts to be seen as politically impartial while only supporting those NGOs which are seemingly apolitical from the Egyptian governments perspective. One important result, he argues, is the exclusion of political or otherwise Islamic organisations from the civil society discussions (Al-Sayyid, 2000). Despite these problems, it is clear that the World Bank and other organisations such as the Inter-American Development Bank have been consulting with NGOs as representatives of civil society at large, what is not clear in this process is how much do the outcomes of these consultations include the reservations expressed by the opposing parties (de Villegas and Adelson, 2000, p. 483), or whether the opposing parties are included in the process. As discussed earlier, most of the civil society organisations are funded to bring changes which are perceived to be conducive for neo-liberal democracy in which sectoral differentiation between the roles of state, market and civil society is established. The relationship between these organisations and international bodies emphasised through consultation processes, are also used to demonstrate the manifestation of people's support for social changes recommended in the reports, in addition to demonstrate the change of emphasis in the World Bank's mandate and interests (Fox and Brown, 1998). The real issue here is not about whether local organisations should participate in such processes or not, but it is about how much they

represent the civil society in their social contexts. It is also about how much does the changing policies of these institutions to engage with civil society organisations, reflect an interest in people's opinions about prescribed neo-liberal institutional reconstitution of their societies. The analysis of the reports demonstrate that the interest in people's will for their own future does not attract much attention. For it is clear that the reports are supporting an altogether new restructuring of relations on neo-liberal sectoral lines whereby strong demand from a civil society on government would improve the public administration (Casaburi et al, 2000, p. 509).

At this level, in the short term, the suggested relations in the reports and the impact observed in the above examples are related with the transformation of a social space within which something like a civil society can be recognised. In this manner around a particular type of organisation, a community, that is demonstratively similar to the idea of civil society implicit in the metaphor, is created. In deciding who could be the relevant receiver of the invitation, on the basis of certain characteristics that are familiar to the western liberal context, the metaphor not only maps but also delimits the possibility of relations. The invitation implicit in the metaphor cannot be accepted by everyone or by any social organisational form (Cohen, 1979, p. 7). The receiver either needs to be suitable for the normative conditions of sectoral governance implicit in the metaphor, or willing to transform itself into the required format. In either case, the process creates a civil society in conjunction with the international agencies that are reviewed here.

The metaphor used in the reports clearly names the organisational model as the civil society. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that any other form of social association or voice will be outside the cognition of these reports and are not relevant for them. Considered in this way, the reports and the following relations based on those ideals would obscure and eventually erase already existing social relations in a community. The idea of people that is used to justify the metaphor becomes abstracted from those people whose lived experiences are not perceived. The organisational civil society and only those involved in it become the locus of people's interests. This particular outcome is clearly more than a process of providing technical assistance as what is being discussed as technical has far reaching political and cultural impact. This could be seen as technical only where social and political spheres are separated and the external involvement is assumed to be located in the social sphere. In other words in relation to the particular political arrangement arrived at in the US, as observed by de Tocqueville.

As the tripartite sectoral governance model permeates through the developing countries, initially obscured relations and their organisational manifestations would begin to disappear. In a report on regional priorities the World Bank has argued that 'economic and social structures of the traditional Latin American state' must be replaced with a 'modern, efficient, administrative state' (Nelson, 2000, p. 414). The adjectives qualifying the ideals share effectively identical understanding of sectoral governance explicit in the reports and in the metaphor that have been analysed. The suggested

process in these instances of policy prescription would have long term impacts on the societies as the restructuring processes would transform the social and political relations that are the outcome of long historical and cultural processes. It is this long term impact I now want to look at.

## 5 Conclusion: Long-term impacts

I have argued so far that the reports and the policies recommended by the international organisations change the internal civil society arrangements at the expense of actually existing/living civil societies. The organisational change suggested in the metaphor and in the ideology of the reports would alter the codes of conduct that are the outcome of particular cultures. By supporting this change through their financial and presumed ideological dominance, in other words through rewards, international organisations establish a path for social change. The change is not merely a technical rearrangement of traditional governance forms into a neo-liberal sectoral format, but a deeper change in the way a society functions and people conduct interpersonal relations. Following Norbert Elias this change may be seen as a civilising process where the *civility* refers to the particular way the West organise and institutionalise its social space.

This view could be opposed with the argument that the move to engage with civil society organisations by international institutions represent progress, as it is an attempt to overcome the orthodoxy of *the Washington Consensus*.<sup>8</sup> Rubens Ricupero points out that the category of measures that have been central to the Consensus ‘have been enforced by IMF and the World Bank over the last 12 or 13 years in a top-down approach imposed through the conditionalities of the loans’ (2000, p. 442). It could be argued that despite this policy orthodoxy, there has been some evidence of more socially and environmentally concerned policy making in recent times which includes project consultations with NGOs and review processes of projects as a response to protests from NGOs pointing out social and environmental impacts of several projects. As a result, a move towards more people oriented policies has been observed while the efficiency and importance of such is questioned (Fox and Brown, 1998), and such a move is also clearly expressed in the reports analysed in this study. In some areas, the institutions have been more willing to discuss the proposed adjustment/investment policies and potential outcomes with civil society organisations. They have also listen to their possible opposition for particular projects, rather than impose what they technically see fit for each country. However, the policy change at the project level due to these consultations and protests has been, in general, patchy (Rumasara, 1999) while no change in the main ideational framework can be observed.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The term is coined by John Williamson to formulate the emerging policy consensus around the particular economic policies for development among international financial institutions based in Washington. The consensus included issues around privatisation, high growth, liberalisation of tax regimes, free competition and property rights (see Williamson, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Again, I am talking about the official language and what it reflects without paying attention to the internal debates about the way policies are decided in international organisations.

This argument of change in the attitude of international organisations towards more people oriented development is a correct one insofar as various civil society organisations are seen to be contributing at project planning, implementation, and review levels through a series of consultative processes. However, as it has been argued in this study, in the new move to include people, it is not clear who is being included. The move to talk about people via civil society organisations rather than discussing issues around strictly economics based understanding of development, has only added people at the project level to the larger agenda. In other words, the process of inclusion is a process to discuss what is the best way to benefit in the already assumed Western framework. In other words the *add and stir* approach to bring people into development does not fundamentally open a new era or space for discussion. It is to the sectoral divide, efficient and a limited state, and private sector involvement through increased foreign direct investment orthodoxy,<sup>10</sup> people through civil society organisations, or NGOs, are added to expand the social change perceived. The argument, developed in this study to suggest that the language of civil society organisations is a metaphor for Western liberalism, points out this central flow in the existing discourse by demonstrating that the language of civil society organisations denotes people's contribution within the above discussed context.

By the observed move to include NGOs as a proxy to civil society, international institutions are able to show their social and environmental credentials without fundamentally altering their overall ideological framework. Thus, the widely used language of civil society organisations is more about the entrenchment of an international liberal agenda based on a particular form of life in a market-economy social relations, than about engaging with peoples concerns as they express themselves. Hence new conditionality of bringing in civil society organisations by creating a civil society is arguably another step in a long line of historical/social changes initiated by external influences in developing countries.

In his seminal work *The Civilising Process*, Elias demonstrates the relationship between changes in the structures of social relations and changing behaviour (Elias, 1994). In analysing the courtly behaviour in France and the spread of these manners throughout Europe, Elias argues that those mannerisms considered to be civilised produce certain relations embedded within organisational arrangements. It is through the spread of these arrangements that the embedded manners and behaviours would spread and permeate through different societies (1994, pp. 265–72). The particular changes encoded in these transformations are not planned by people, but they are inevitably subject to them. Elias considers this process as

the spread of our[western] institutions and standards of conduct beyond the West, constitutes, the last wave.... 'Civilized' forms of conduct spread to these other areas because and to the extent that in them, through their incorporation into the

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<sup>10</sup> To which Comaroff and Comaroff refer as 'messianic, millennial capitalism that represents itself as a gospel of salvation....that if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity wholly to transform the universe of the marginalised and disempowered' (2000, p. 294).

network whose center the West still constitutes, the structure of their societies and of human relationships is [likewise] changing (1994, pp. 461–62).

The metaphor of civil society organisations used by international organisations, that are able to recommend policy and reward, or punish, the compliance through various financial or political mechanisms, is a part of a civilising process. By creating a sphere of relations, by conducting business with the particular civil society organisations, international institutions are actually transferring the western liberal codes of conduct and behaviour into the development context. It is by applying these codes and behaviours social relations begin to change. The civil society organisations' function perceived as the arena for people's participation that balances the state's excessive involvement in the social sphere requires the creation of sectoral rearrangement of social relations. This demand means that those social relations constituted as a result of historical and cultural processes need to be reconstituted for the separation of political from the social sphere. At the level of providing funds to civil society organisations, this demand is gradually and actively initiated by international organisations. In order to be able see the metaphor as the location of participation, people need to disassociate themselves from traditional ways of associating, where political, religious or kin relations may be central to the organisation of social relations. By using the civil society organisations an attempt is made to bring a long term socio-political change on the basis of the Western experience. Therefore, the seemingly technical recommendations by these international organisations, in which the metaphor is an agent of change for the social functions, conduct and eventually the personalities in target societies, are actually political interventions, insofar as they intervene in the entirety of the society for a change implicitly encoded in the metaphor.



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