

Civil society is a phrase that is frequently referred to used in academia, press, media and in political circles but if you were to stop and ask a casual passer-by what is meant by “civil society” it is unlikely many people could give an in-depth answer.

According to the World Bank: “Civil society ... refers to a wide array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.”

Perhaps the most profound and enduring definition of the term is that of Locke(1663), who describes civil society as a contract between equals founded on the basis of voluntarism. Tocqueville (op. cit.) builds on the definition provided by Locke and extends the concept further by introducing the idea of collective action as a way of curbing state tyranny for the purpose of producing the common good. Thus, the notion of civil society as a model of self-governance through voluntary effort for the delivery of common good was first introduced. Also, the ideas of voluntarism and collective action projected by these authors form the basis of democracy which is crucial for civil society. Friedman and Mckaiser argue that civil society and democracy are interdependent. According to them, democracy is the vehicle through which civil society can acquire a voice to speak for the people.

A civil society is comprised of groups or organizations working in the interest of the citizens but operating outside of the governmental and for-profit sectors. ... Civil society is sometimes referred to as the civil sector, a term that is used to differentiate it from other sectors that comprise a functioning society. Civil society can be understood as the "third sector" of society, distinct from government and business, and including the family and the private sphere

The term civil society is used in the sense of 1) the aggregate of non-governmental organizations and institutions that manifest interests and will of citizens or 2) individuals and organizations in a society which are independent of the government. Sometimes the term *civil society* is used in the more general sense of the elements such as freedom of speech, an independent judiciary, etc, those make up a democratic society.

The term became popular in political and economic discussions in the 1980s, when it started to be identified with non-state movements that were defying authoritarian regimes, especially in central and eastern Europe and Latin America.

When mobilized, civil society, sometimes called the “third sector” (after government and commerce), has the power to influence the actions of elected policy-makers and businesses. But the nature of civil society - what it is and what it does - is evolving, in response to both technological developments and more nuanced changes within societies.

Globally, the concept of civil society has evolved from these associational platforms to comprise a wide range of organized and organic groups of different forms, sizes, and

functions. There have been significant changes over time in the civil society landscape. At different periods, community-based organizations, workers' or labor unions, professional associations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been the most prominent.

Consequently, defining civil society is not a simple task. Inasmuch as there is evidence of similar experiences across continents and regions, countries, and more specifically, groups that share similar cultural values and attributes within a country, have some distinct forms of social organization, cultural and political traditions, as well as contemporary economic structures.

Numerous academics and practitioners have proffered definitions for civil society based on their research and experiences. The most commonly used definition was created by CIVICUS, which conceives of civil society as the arena outside the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations, and institutions to advance shared interests. This definition has been widely accepted and utilized within various platforms. However, it is critical that the definition of civil society represents its current evolution, nuances, and growing diversity. A proposed definition that captures its current form is "an ecosystem of organized and organic social and cultural relations existing in the space between the state, business, and family, which builds on indigenous and external knowledge, values, traditions, and principles to foster collaboration and the achievement of specific goals by and among citizens and other stakeholders."

Civil society refers to the space for collective action around shared interests, purposes and values, generally distinct from government and commercial for-profit actors. Civil society includes charities, development NGOs, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, social movements, coalitions and advocacy groups. However civil society is not homogeneous and the boundaries between civil society and government or civil society and commercial actors can be blurred. There is certainly no one 'civil society' view, and civil society actors need to contend with similar issues of representativeness and legitimacy as those of other representatives and advocates.

Despite its complexity and heterogeneity, the inclusion of civil society voices is essential to give expression to the marginalised and those who often are not heard. Civil society actors can enhance the participation of communities in the provision of services and in policy decision-making

Civil society within this context comprises qualities associated with goals, relationships, contextual experiences, values, and informal and formal structures. In recent times, the different typologies of civil society are:

- Civil society organizations (CSOs) comprising NGOs, faith-based organizations, and community-based organizations that have an organized structure and mission and are typically registered entities and groups;
- Online groups and activities, including social media communities that can be “organized” but do not necessarily have physical, legal, or financial structures;
- Social movements of collective action and/or identity, which can be online or physical;
- Labor unions and labor organizations representing workers; and
- Social entrepreneurs employing innovative and/or market-oriented approaches for social and environmental outcomes

More important than just what civil society *is* is what it *does*:

1. Filling gaps in services. Providing services not provided adequately by government or business, especially to marginalized or underserved groups.
2. Watchdogs. Keeping an eye on government and business, ever alert for corruption, waste, violations of rights, and inequalities.
3. Ethical guardians. Monitoring, detecting, reporting, and keeping a focus on ethical behavior in government and business.
4. Advocating for transparency and accountability of both government and business.
5. Advocating for the marginalized and disenfranchised.
6. Raising awareness of public policy issues.
7. Correcting democracy deficits. Countering corruption, weak legal structure and lack of clear and consistent rule of law, lack of inclusiveness, and human rights violations.
8. Advocating for human rights.
9. Advocating for good governance.
10. Advocating for transparency and accountability of both government and business.
11. Advocating in favor of particular policies.
12. Advocating in opposition to particular policies.
13. Advocating for unmet needs.
14. Advocating for the needs and interests of marginalized and disenfranchised groups.

15. Advocating for greater transparency.
16. Advocating for greater accountability.
17. Acting as watchdogs against bad governance.
18. Acting as ethical guardians.
19. Exposing corruption.
20. Advocating for change.
21. Advocating for reform

Put more simply, civil society has two distinctive roles in society:

1. Providing services. Beyond the scope of government and business, especially for the underserved.
2. Agents of change. Advocating for change, especially for the marginalized and disenfranchised.

There is some dispute as to whether certain types of organizations should be considered civil society due to various *conflicts of interest* or *self interest*, such as:

- For-profit media. More of a business, focused on the profit motive, rather than having the general interests of society at heart.
- Media associated with political parties, or at least a dominant political party.
- Religions. Pursue the interests of their members, but not necessarily non-members.
- Labor unions. Pursue the interests of their members, but not typically non-members.
- Professional associations. Pursue the interests of their members, but not typically non-members.
- Trade associations. Pursue the interests of their members, which are businesses, but not typically non-members.
- Sports teams or clubs. Pursue the interests of their members and fans, but not typically non-members or non-fans.
- Clubs in general. Pursue the interests of their members, but not typically non-members.

