

**RUTGERS**

School of Arts and Sciences

**2018**



## **The Centrality of Civil Society**

Dr. Roland Rich

United Nations and Global Policy Studies

Political Science Department

Rutgers, New Brunswick

**Occasional Paper 10**

# RUTGERS GLOBAL POLICY ROUNDTABLE

Rutgers Global Policy Roundtable is an initiative of the MA Program in Political Science – Concentration in the United Nations and Global Policy Studies (UNMA) developed jointly with its partner institution - Marymount Manhattan College in New York (MMC). The Roundtable offers lectures and panel discussions in New York City and on the Rutgers University campus concerning important global issues. It is also aimed to assist UNMA students in their professional development and academic growth.

Rutgers Global Policy Roundtable offers three types of sessions:

1. Professional development for UNMA and MMC students;
2. Sessions featuring the research of Rutgers faculty and students which is cutting-edge in the realm of global affairs;
3. Sessions which pair Rutgers faculty with UN officials and/or members of the internationally-oriented private sector as well as Rutgers alumni to exchange views and policy perspectives on pressing global issues.

For information on Rutgers Global Policy Roundtable, please contact us at: [UNMA@rutgers.edu](mailto:UNMA@rutgers.edu)

**BIO:** Dr. Roland Rich is the former Executive Head of the United Nations Democracy Fund and Executive Director of the United Nations Office for Partnerships, and prior to that, the founding director of the Centre for Democratic Institutions, Australia's government funded democracy promotion institute, at the Australian National University. He had previously served for 23 years in the Australian Foreign Service including as Ambassador to Laos.

His latest book, *Democracy in Crisis: Why, Where, How to Respond*, was published by Lynne Rienner Publishers in 2017. Dr. Rich is Assistant Professor in the MA Program in Political Science - United Nations and Global Policy Studies, at Rutgers University, and an Honorary Fellow at the Crawford School of the Australian National University.

[unstudied.rutgers.edu](http://unstudied.rutgers.edu)

*Rutgers Cuba Conference*  
*Universities as Anchors in Sustaining Community and Economic Development*  
*5 November 2018, Varadero Resort*

# The Centrality of Civil Society

**Dr. Roland Rich**  
**United Nations and Global Policy Studies**  
**Political Science Department**  
**Rutgers, New Brunswick**

The subject of this paper is the importance, indeed the centrality, of civil society to economic development. It is an issue that encompasses, but transcends, the economic aspects because civil society is important to all facets of a nation's public life. This is not a paper specifically about Cuba, but the issue of the role of civil society is germane to all societies.

The most common definition of civil society is the one provided by Larry Diamond:

Civil society is the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules.<sup>1</sup>

There are several features of this definition to highlight. The first is that civil society is organized and may be bound by a legal order. Individual organizations may be tightly or loosely structured but civil society requires a certain level of formality. It is more than a bunch of friends meeting at the coffee shop. Yet it is not of the same level of intensity of organization as a political party or a profit-making corporation.

The second feature is that civil society is autonomous from the state. It is this feature that leads to the common practice of defining civil society as comprising non-governmental organizations or NGOs. But to define an entity in the negative is not a good practice in social science. The use of the term NGO nevertheless gives rise to another important acronym that happens to be oxymoronic, that of the GONGO, the government organized non-governmental organization. Groups that are "official" or directly or indirectly part of the government or one of its agencies are, by definition, not part of civil society.

Third, civil society is voluntary. This takes it beyond the realm of the family. In the developed world, the focus is on its autonomy from the state but in the developing world, the feature that is most noteworthy is that civil society is not part of the family. Accordingly, it is not part of society's

---

<sup>1</sup> Larry Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation", *Journal of Democracy* 5 (1994): 4–18, 5

traditional structures and it does not follow ascriptive allegiances but rather, coalesces around causes, issues and activities.

Other definitions of civil society, such as that by Philippe Schmitter<sup>2</sup>, add a fourth component, that civil society is not part of the for-profit economy. This aspect requires some clarification. In wealthy countries, civil society can be sustained by voluntary contributions of time and money. There are philanthropists, corporations practicing corporate social responsibility, wealthy people and committed individuals who fund, support and staff civil society. In the developing world, there are far fewer of these supporters. The difference was to a large extent met by contributions from the global North or civil society in the global South in the practice of global solidarity. But many governments of the global South are preventing this flow of support and placing other restrictions on civil society indeed the Cuban government is among them.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, some civil society groups have taken up income generating activities to support their work, though their primary focus remains cause-oriented, not profit-oriented.

In summary, civil society is not part of the state, not part of the private sector and not part of the family. It has some level of organization. And it is active in the public life of a polity, acting as a source of contestation to established ideas and contributing to the marketplace of ideas. One criticism of civil society organizations is that they are part of the Western world and do not belong in the global South. This perspective is both facile and empirically wrong. I had the honor to head the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) working directly with civil society organizations from the global South. Since its inception in 2006, more than 25,000 applications from such groups have been received by the Fund. Yes, some are off-shoots of structures from Europe like ActionAid branches or Transparency International chapters. But the vast majority are locally formed and sustained. Among the groups supported by UNDEF are a Maasai women's group in Tanzania, an indigenous group from Oaxaca, a village association from the Chittagong Hills of Bangladesh, pygmy groups from Congo Kinshasa and Gabon, and the Inuit association of Russia. Civil society is just as much a part of the global South as it is the global North. In Indonesia alone, there are 190,000 civil society organizations.<sup>4</sup>

There has been a widespread acceptance that civil society is relevant to politics, but there is less understanding of its importance to development. It was Amartya Sen who made the link between rights and development in his seminal book *Development as Freedom*.<sup>5</sup> According to Sen, it was inaccurate to see development as a top down process of planning and investment because the fundamental building bloc of economic development is the individual and the key to unlock development is to allow that individual to fulfil her capabilities.

---

<sup>2</sup> Philippe Schmitter, "Civil Society East and West", in Diamond, Larry, Marc F. Plattner, Yun-han Chu, and Hungmao Tien, eds., *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies: Themes and Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) 240

<sup>3</sup> International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), World Movement for Democracy Secretariat at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), *Defending Civil Society*, [http://www.icnl.org/research/resources/dcs/DCS\\_Report\\_Second\\_Edition\\_English.pdf](http://www.icnl.org/research/resources/dcs/DCS_Report_Second_Edition_English.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Asia Pacific Philanthropy Information Network, *Philanthropy and the Third Sector in Asia and the Pacific*, <http://www.asianphilanthropy.org/index.html> which is based on International Classification of Non-profit Organisation (ICNPO), developed by the Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, initiated and co-coordinated by the Centre for Civil Society Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore

<sup>5</sup> Anchor books (NY) 1999

Sen's capabilities approach has transformed the view of development from a top down to a bottom up perspective. The keys to development become education, agency and, of course, freedom. The role of the state is to provide a system within which individuals can fully build and deploy their capabilities. Sen argues in favor of democracy as the most appropriate political system for that purpose. And he makes the case for universal human rights from an economic perspective.

Sen puts forward three relevant arguments in this regard<sup>6</sup>:

- Human rights have intrinsic importance to every individual
- Human rights play a consequential role in providing political incentives for economic security
- Human rights play a constructive role in the genesis of values and priorities.

When discussing human rights, Sen incorporates the full panoply of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. This was how human rights were originally conceived. Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms Speech included freedom from want. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this year celebrating its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, deals with all human rights whether civil, political, economic, social or cultural, in one instrument. A great damage was done to the human rights canon during the Cold War by the division of rights into two separate covenants, one dealing with civil and political rights and the other with economic, social and cultural right. It gave the impression there was a menu from which states could choose. Some states did so, with the United States favoring the former and the socialist world, the latter.

Continuing steps are being taken to repair this breach. The 1978 Resolution 32/130 of the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed that all human rights "are indivisible and interdependent"<sup>7</sup>. This was reaffirmed in the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action which states that "All human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated."<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, there is no hierarchy of rights, they all apply with equal vigor.

Article 20 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association." This right is given legal expression in Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. But Article 8 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights links freedom of association with the right to form trade unions, ignoring the relevance of the freedom of association to other economic activities. This is an example of the problems created with the bifurcation of human rights into the two covenants rather than in a single instrument.

Freedom of association is at the core of civil society. It is the right of individuals to organize in groups for whatever purpose. It was often seen only as a civil and political right because one of the well-known ways to exercise one's freedom of association was to join a group advocating for a political cause. But in keeping with the indivisibility of human rights, freedom of association, should

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 246

<sup>7</sup> UNGA Res. 32/130, *Alternative approaches and ways and means within the United Nations system for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms*, para 1(a)

<sup>8</sup> Para. 5, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/vienna.aspx>

be seen as extending beyond the civil and political sphere to encompass the economic, social and cultural sphere. Indeed, the words “association” and “social” come from the same Latin root *socius* meaning “friend or ally” as a noun and “sharing” as an adjective<sup>9</sup>. The Latin root also gives us the word “society”.

The freedom to associate is more than a right, it is common yearning of humanity. A feature of society is that individuals will voluntarily cooperate and work together in an organized manner. That cooperation will benefit politics, social relations and the economy. The freedom of association is thus a key to development.

Cuba has already taken the first steps in the direction of recognizing the linkage between voluntary organized association and economic development. Cooperatives operate in Cuban agriculture, and in December 2012 the National Assembly authorized urban cooperatives, on an experimental basis.<sup>10</sup> These have taken the form of either transferring state-run businesses to their workers or the establishment of new businesses. It is an example of the acceptance by Cuba that development can be a bottom up process; it is a case of accepting that individuals have the capacity to work together to share risk and reward; and it is a matter of trusting people to look after their own best interests. Amartya Sen’s argument is that individual freedom to develop capabilities will benefit not only the economy, but also society as a whole. It causes a transformation of those individuals from subjects to citizens. As subjects, people rely on leaders to look after them. As citizens, people have the responsibility to take their own decisions. The responsibility of government is to provide a system to allow that responsibility to be exercised.

The notion that civil society is a Western construct is mistaken because the evidence of its existence all around the world, North and South, is overwhelming. But if not Western, in which category does civil society belong? The response owes a debt of gratitude to Alexis de Tocqueville who was the first to recognize its existence and marvel at its breadth and vibrancy in the America of the early nineteenth century<sup>11</sup>. Tocqueville came from the old continent dominated by kings and bishops where individual lives followed the pattern set by those leaders. Autonomous group organization was unthinkable. Feudal society had no civil society.

What Tocqueville found in the new country he was visiting was a society freed from those feudal constraints, a society where there was no royalty or state religion to dictate the content of their subjects’ lives, a society where people were free to associate as they wished. Tocqueville was describing the first mass experiment in social organization established on the basis that all humankind was created equal and that individuals were free to pursue happiness. The truth of this assertion was not based on any revealed text or royal proclamation. It was seen as self-evident.

Civil society, therefore, does not belong to North, South, East or West; it belongs to modernity.

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/socius>

<sup>10</sup> Cliff duRand, “Cuba’s New Cooperatives”, *Monthly Review; an Independent Socialist Magazine*, 1 Nov. 2017, <https://monthlyreview.org/2017/11/01/cubas-new-cooperatives/>

<sup>11</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Penguin Books (2003) London (original two volume edition first published in 1835 and 1840)



# RUTGERS

School of Arts and Sciences

MA Program in Political Science - United Nations and Global Policy Studies

Department of Political Science

Rutgers University–New Brunswick

[unstudied.rutgers.edu](http://unstudied.rutgers.edu)