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# **Why Adult Educators Should be Concerned with Civil Society**

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**Abstract: The concept of civil society has gained currency over the past twenty-five years. This paper provides a local, national and global perspective of civil society, identifies the types of organizational forms found within it, and explores the role of adult educators and adult education in shaping it.**

## **Introduction**

The concept of civil society, an idea rooted in classic philosophical thought, has resurfaced across the academic disciplines as well as across the continents with a veritable tour de force that cannot be ignored. The characteristics and nature of civil society vary by degrees among communities and countries dependent upon the cultural, economic, historical, political, and social traditions held by each. There is broad, consensual agreement that civil society is represented by organizations, actions, and relationships peculiar to and different from those of political society (the state) and economic society (the market).

Voluntary organizations (typically identified with civil society) in the North American, Western, Central, and Eastern European contexts have a long history of providing adult education opportunities for the general population. Likewise, there is almost universal agreement among adult educators that participation in voluntary organizations provides unlimited opportunities for informal learning and serves an important socialization function. Of particular significance is the argument that participation in voluntary organizations often precedes increased interest and activity in society as a whole. In effect, it is argued that participation in voluntary organizations "teaches" democracy or democratic behavior.

This paper provides a local, national and global perspective of civil society, identifies the types of organizational forms found within it, and explores the role of adult educators and adult education in shaping it.

## **The Local Perspective**

Civil society has recently become the central focus of the debates regarding the perceived decline of American society. It is argued that civil society must be strong for democracy to prevail,

economy to grow and social problems to be resolved. The current social disarray is primarily seen as the result of the weakening of civil society.

Pressed for more details regarding the occupants of the space of civil society, Americans first point toward the associations described by Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* - those small local citizen organizations that appeared so central to the newly forming democracy that he observed.

Today, however, we usually add not-for-profit organizations to the space of civil society recognizing that some associations created or became not-for-profit institutions, a form of organization that has become almost synonymous with civil society. However, they are significantly different than associations and the two should not be grouped together as civil society organizations. In fact, not-for-profit institutions are distinctive forms that are in contrast to their associational progenitors.

The not-for-profit corporation is radically different from associations in structure, sources of authority, incentives and knowledge base. For example:

Associations tend to be informal and horizontal. Not-for-profit corporations are usually formal and hierarchical.

Not-for-profits are legally controlled by a few. Associations are activated by the consent of each participant.

Associational participants are motivated by diverse incentives other than pay. Not-for-profit employees are provided paid incentives.

Associations generally use the experience and knowledge of member citizens to perform their functions. Not-for-profits use the special knowledge of professionals and experts to perform their functions.

Further not-for-profit institutions, whether a hospital, university or child welfare agency has taken on the basic form of institutions of industrial production or public bureaucracies with presidents, chief executives, deputies, department heads, bureau chiefs on down to front line producers.

While associations vary greatly in scale, they have at least twelve distinct attributes that help us recognize their distinction from government, business and not-for-profit institutions.

- First, associations are groups of citizens pulled together by common consent. This consent is based upon a mutual concern or interest.

- Second, local associations can not only provide daily caring support, they also have unique capacities to respond in times of great stress and crisis.

- Third, in a mass society we recognize the critical need for individual responses to individual dilemmas.
- Fourth, associations provide a collective form of problem solving.
- Fifth, solutions are based on personal experience and common sense and serve as a counter balance or alternative to the narrow world of technical answers.
- Sixth, associations provide citizens one of the two means by which they can use their political power in a democracy. By voting, citizens delegate power, in associations, citizens make power.
- Seventh, community associations proliferate to incorporate people of all conditions, capacities and interests.
- Eighth, America's great space for leadership development is in associational life.
- Ninth, associations provide a vital mediating function in societies dominated by institutions.
- Tenth, recent research suggests that a rich network of local associations is the nest from which enterprises grow.
- Eleventh, associations provide the basic context for the formation and expression of citizen opinions and values.
- Twelfth, associations are historically the seed bed form which the more formalized systems grow.

Today we are facing the limits of many of our aging traditional institutions. Large city schools seem unable to educate effectively. Criminal justice systems fail to reform. Welfare systems fail to support people who become productive citizens. Medical systems contribute very little to the public health. In the face of these limits we are investing incredible technical and financial resources in institutional reform that has had quite limited effect.

At the same time, our associations are hard at work inventing alternative and effective forms that still "elude the observations" of policymakers. We see a multitude of local community initiatives to create new educational forms or appropriate new schools. Associational efforts to provide alternatives for youth have proliferated across the nation. Church and other associational initiatives are creating new approaches to introducing and supporting marginalized people as productive citizens. Local "healthy community" initiatives are creating effective means of actually improving health status.

What has most clearly "eluded" many institutional reformers is the fact that the old systems may now be inappropriate. In many cases, the ability to "observe" the associational inventions may suggest the form of new institutions rather than the reform of outdated structures.

### **The National Perspective**

The national perspective carries forward McKnight's theme concerning the characteristics and qualities of not-for-profit institutions from a national level, that of Hungary. Hungary is a particularly interesting case for several reasons. First, Hungary is a dynamic example of how civil society develops as it transitions from a socialist system to one that is more democratic. Second, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the number of not-for-profit organizations in Hungary has exploded, now totaling some 50,000 new registered entities. And finally, Hungarians point to the phenomenal growth of not-for-profit organizations as an indication that they are reclaiming their traditionally strong and vibrant civil society.

One of the questions raised by McKnight is whether the institutional form of not-for-profit organizations, characterized by bureaucracy, administrative staff, and professional expertise, accurately reflect a unique social realm significantly different than market and government organizations. Or, as he argues, have these institutional forms of civil society organizations adopted a structure and form that no longer makes them vehicles for citizen participation, democratic communication, and learning democracy, both nonformally and informally.

The Hungarian situation is critiqued from three vantage points: the discourse of deficiency and the role of intellectuals; professionalization; and not-for-profit management. Recommendations to support the democratic ideal of civil society are then made.

Hungarian adult educators often adhere to a well-known and established philosophy of adult education that focuses attention on the individual. The social, economic and political context are taken-for-granted realities which call upon individuals to adapt to the system. Such an approach to adult education diagnoses individuals as deficient of the adaptability and coping skills requisite to existence in a rapidly changing environment. One particular adult education model assumed a pyramid shape based on a series of categorized individual and community deficiencies starting at the base with the "lack of confidence" proceeding upward with the "lack of personal connection, lack of cooperation, lack of knowledge and information, and lack of capital." Someone else identified "lack of self-esteem" as an even broader based problem than "lack of confidence."

Supporting this model of adult education are adult educators and voluntary organization leaders, self identified "intellectuals", who "are not peasants and not workers." These "'real' intellectuals are absolutely liberal and independent and are floating between the powers." These characteristics define what Gramsci named the "conservative intellectual", one whom supports rather than challenges the status quo.

Coinciding with the discourse of deficiency is a trend towards the professionalization and bureaucratization of voluntary organizations indicated at the most practical level by the uncritical adoption of nonprofit management training programs. Weber's theory of social organization is useful in a discussion of this trend because he identified "associations" as a basic category of

social organization. Further, he argues that associations are always to some extent authoritarian in virtue of having an executive staff," volunteer or paid.

As early as 1991, Hungarian international financier George Soros claimed "we must abandon the spirit of volunteerism that characterized the foundations in their heyday and replace it by professionalism." Many others stand with Soros in the quest for professionalism in Hungarian voluntary organizations. It is generally accepted that professionalization of a certain field rests upon two major characteristics: 1) the identification of a specialized body of knowledge; and 2) the training of practitioners. The professions themselves are constructed upon a market model characterized by the exchange of fees for service.

The proliferation in Budapest of Western-funded voluntary organization management training programs designed to develop a cadre of executive and administrative staff places nascent organizations at risk of succumbing to authoritarian practices. Second, the leaders of Hungary's current transformation claim the goal of the institutionalization of the democratic ideal which, in the best case scenario, would be evident in the organizations in which individuals participate. The associational authoritarianism suggested by Weber challenges this ideal within the very organizations which are sentimentally referred to in Hungary as "small circles of freedom." What began in Hungary as the spontaneous association of a few people, "like in the fairy tales," is encountering well-planned programs laden with technical skills grounded in the "cult of efficiency."

To counteract the trends described above, it is recommended that we adopt practices that incorporate the following concepts: an asset versus needs approach; a transformative practice of adult education; democratic communication; and radical intellectualism. By doing so, the perspective shifts from the individual to the wider social context. For example, Kretzmann and McKnight argue that "the needs-based strategy can guarantee only survival, and can never lead to serious change or community development, this orientation must be regarded as one of the major causes of the sense of hopelessness that pervades discussions about the future..." (1993, 5).

Second, appropriate as a foil against the bureaucratic trend is transformative adult education such as Freire's theory of conscientization. According to Freire, conscientization is "a force countering the bureaucracy, which threatens to deaden the revolutionary vision and dominate the people in the very name of their freedom" (1985, 87). The bureaucracy of the previous regime in Hungary is legendary. Professionalization of the voluntary sector and civil society suggests, among other things, a trend towards bureaucratization which deserves attention. Care must be taken to avoid swapping one bureaucracy for another.

Third, the notion that individuals can learn democracy through participation in voluntary organizations can be well-informed by Habermas's concept of the "ideal speech situation." The "ideal speech situation" seeks to "institutionalize discourse or critique systematically distorted communication" (McCarthy, 1975, xvii). Based on the democratic ideal, discourse acknowledges each individual's right and capacity to communicate rendering bureaucratization, professionalization, and rigid control of communication problematic. Considering the nonprofit management trend towards the use of such business tools as strategic planning, the "ideal speech situation" offers a protective mechanism to safeguard the voluntary sector from technocrats and bureaucrats.

And finally, instead of viewing a certain class of individuals as "intellectuals," a Gramscian approach would consider all people intellectuals. "Conservative intellectuals" support the status quo, perpetuate the social reproduction of the values of the dominant class, and focus on

individual deficiencies. On the contrary, radical intellectuals challenge the status quo and view individuals within their social context.

As such, a radical intellectual would shun the discourse of deficiency, question the "market thinking" which underlies much of the nonprofit management training curriculum and question this curriculum's appropriateness for use in voluntary organizations, and look critically at the hierarchy which bureaucratization, led by professionalization, introduces into voluntary organizations.

### **Global Civil Society**

Several of the issues identified at the local and national level also surface in the global perspective. Global civil society is a space where things happen. It is not an actor in itself. It is a place where social movement organizations, international research and advocacy networks, global policy bodies as well as a wide variety of non-governmental (NGO) and international non-governmental organizations (INGO) interact with states, United Nations and other intergovernmental bodies and the private sector itself. It is a political space which has grown in response to and in resistance to the globalizing forces of the day. It is of course the close conceptual cousin of "civil society", which has re-emerged over the past 25 years as a useful concept to describe the autonomous space for citizen action, organization and theorization.

It is argued that a set of global civil societies or a complex and elaborate global civil society is emerging and has gained visibility in the context of global economic consolidation. Global civil society refers to at least two related phenomena. The first phenomena can be understood as the sum-total of local, national, or regional civil society structures. Within this form of evolving global civil society practice, the tasks are the identification of local, national and regional forms of civil society and the creation of ways to strengthen communication, coordination, reflection, and capacities to act among discreet organizational forms which already exist.

A second form of global civil society formation is represented by the proliferation of specifically global forms of civil society. The Nestle Milk Boycott organizations, the various environmental organizations, women's organizations, peace groups and thousands of others have arisen within spaces of world citizen action. For these forms of global civil society, while composed of groups and individuals all located in particular localities, no national or local identity can be necessarily contributed to the whole. Leadership shifts according to functions, timing, locations of activities or cost effectiveness. Among the organizational form of these kinds of global civil society structures are the INGOs. In the field of adult education, the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) is one such INGO. According to the Canadian International Development Agency, INGOs are global networks of individuals, non-governmental organizations or professional associations. They generally focus on one specific issue and they are driven by accepted universal values. INGOs frequently play an important policy and coordinating role at the international level.

Structurally, in contrast to the traditional bureaucratic and hierarchic model of organizations appropriate for a large number of people, "networks are emerging both among the global elite and the powerless everywhere." It is suggested that "networking" consists of at least the following types of activities: research on skills, needs, interests of network members; face-to-face meetings; national, regional, continental or international events; exchange of letters; telephone conversations; fax exchanges; newsletter or bulletin services; publications and exchange of materials; and electronic mail systems using computers.

Transformative adult education is about supporting shifts away from the global market vision of growth-oriented, market driven, and consumerist human societies towards life-affirming visions. Transformative practices contribute to the transformation of structures of power and domination be these discursive, electronic, mechanical, social, or physical. Adult education and intentional adult learning has an important role to play in the strengthening of global civil society. Commitment to transformative learning demands considerable self-reflection. In the contest of shifting paradigms and divergent visions of community, men and women need to open themselves to new ways of understanding who and what we are. The dominant world has often privileged whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness and the English language. The conversation between women and men, persons from rich and poor countries needs to be honest, vital and respectful.

Many of the information programmes of the various global NGOs or networks would be more effective if they were to be re-conceptualized as learning networks or adult education programmes because of the emphasis needed on interactive starting-where-one lives learning. Global learning strategies are an integral component of an evolving global civil society.

Civil society and global civil society contain vast and growing contradictions. In international development circles for example, NGOs are being transformed overnight by the opportunities to become subcontractors to the World Bank or other major national or international funding bodies. Whereas groups of protesting NGOs activities would at one time have been met with police or military force, they are increasingly met with contracts. It is not possible to make sweeping statements about all civil society organizations in contexts like these. We also know that not all global civil society organizations, international NGOs and global networks are democratic spaces.

Adult education, which refers to both institutional as well as social movement contexts and in both formal and informal settings, has an important role to play in the strengthening of the capacities of global civil society. For adult educators who are allied with social movements, community-based associations or nongovernmental organizations civil society contains the vision of a place where the raw savagery of global capitalism can be openly criticized and examined, and is a public sphere where transformative ideas can be nourished and developed. This releases energy in support of a global urgency for environmentally and socially relevant democracy.

## **Summary**

There are several common themes running through the three perspectives of civil society offered in this paper. For example, all three perspectives included concern about the role of the market and its impact on civil society organizations and associations. Likewise, the organizational structure of civil society institutions were scrutinized in each scenario to determine their degree of uniqueness from the organizations of political and economic society. And finally, it was determined that adult education, informal, nonformal, and formal, especially transformative adult education, either played or has a significant role to play in the organizations, institutions, and associations of civil society.

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