

A Practical Guide To Nonprofit Organizations Amidst “Global Civil Society” (GCS)

by Brian Abelson, Idealist Intern, Summer 2008

What is Civil Society?

“Civil Society” has long been a term used to describe the accumulation of voluntary social and civic organizations within a given political context. In this manner, “Civil Society” is defined in contrast to the “State.” In this formulation, while civil society is characterized by consent, the state is characterized by coercion. Many social scientists and political theorists, including Robert Putnam, Benjamin Barber, and Francis Fukuyama (to name a few) have discussed the merits of civil society, often arguing that there can never be “too much” of it, and that Civil Society always seems to be under attack by forces of the state, the global market, and international political organizations.

While theoretical discussions of “civil society” may prove to be useful in framing our discussion of Global Civil Society (GCS), one will find that they often fall short in adequately describing the complexities that arise when charitable organizations take on a global reach. Yet while we could spend pages upon pages fleshing out the theoretical and historical intricacies of the term, the point of this discussion in the Nonprofit FAQ is to provide a practical discussion for and about nonprofit organizations operating “beyond” or “without” borders.

How does Global Civil Society (GCS) change this definition?

Simply put, the idea of GCS is paradoxical; if civil society is defined in contrast to a state, then what is GCS defined in contrast to? Without a coherent global state or single system of global government, it seems that charitable work taking place across and/or beyond borders becomes even more of a “loose and baggy monster” (to borrow a favorite saying of this site’s editor, Putnam Barber) than it is within any single country. While civil society scholars working with Lester M. Salamon (Director of John Hopkins’ Center for Civil Society Studies, <http://www.jhu.edu/ccss/>) have embarked upon an effort to analyze the scope of the private non-profit sector around the world (now covering 39 different countries: <http://www.jhu.edu/~cnp/research/index.html>), this “Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project” may be better understood as a study of civil societies around the globe rather than *global* civil society in the sense described above.

That being said, perhaps the best way to define how GCS is different from the work of the Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project is to point out that charitable work around the world often takes on different forms than those commonly accepted as what the western world understands as the “third sector.” As Nidhi Srinivas points out [here](#), the Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project’s precise definition of global civil society may exclude “farmer cooperatives in South Asia and Latin America that rely on voluntarism but distribute income back to their members.” Indeed, “such organizations are hard to define in terms of one sector.”

For example, the “Fair Trade” movement, which has gained considerable popularity and normative status throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe, is predicated upon partnerships with for-profit cooperatives in growing communities. These cooperatives, which are created to better the lives of those who are part of it, often team up with cooperative importers in the North. An example of this can be seen in relationship between Cooperative Coffee (<http://coopcoffees.com>), its cooperative growers (one of which can be found here: <http://www.oromiacoffeeunion.org/index.html>) and international nonprofits which set “Fair Trade” standards (<http://www.fairtrade.net/>). In this case, an international and globally recognized nonprofit (Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO)), provides the service of labeling growers, exporters, and importers of agricultural goods which meet their standards in order to facilitate the on-the-ground charitable work which the farmer cooperatives in the global south provide to their individual members. Thus, it is ultimately the for-profit farmer cooperatives which serve the charitable purpose on which FLO’s not-for-profit mission is predicated. As one can see, such charitable partnerships soon begin to break down clean-cut ideas of a globally coherent, not-for-profit “third sector.”

Accountability and Transparency in GCS; Does it Go Both Ways?

Despite the paradoxes inherent in definitions of GCS, the fact remains that nonprofit organizations (NPO’s) and nongovernmental organizations (NGO’s) are increasingly expanding their influence across and beyond borders. This expansion has occurred to the point that many political theorists and social scientists have begun to locate the hope (or fear) of global governance within these border-hopping and/or -spanning organizations. A clear example of this trend can be found in the fact that “over half of World Bank projects are currently executed in partnership with NGOs.” This change in operating procedure has not only co-opted some of the Bank’s former critics but also created a situation in which “NGOs are at the center of World Bank policy, and moreover often determine it.” (quoted from: “The Power Shift and the NGO Credibility Crisis” By James McGann and Mary Johnstone” [here](#)). By visiting the World Bank’s topical website for civil society [here](#) and browsing the wealth of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) that they partner with [here](#), one will no doubt recognize the wide variety of well known NGO’s which are now teaming up with the Bank to achieve its developmental goals. Thus, as the World Bank has come under increased scrutiny for being disconnected from the communities that its policies affect, it has turned to its “watchdogs” to help reshape its organizational structure in order to better achieve its mission – to alleviate world poverty through economic development.

Yet while some critics may note that such partnerships weaken the “watchdog” function of NGOs toward international institutions like the World Bank, it is clear that the increased presence of NGOs within developing countries has put pressure on these institutions to become more transparent and accountable to the communities that they affect. This, of course, can be said as well for international organizations like Amnesty International (<http://www.amnesty.org/>) and Human Rights Watch (<http://www.hrw.org/>) which have spearheaded global campaigns against human rights abuses, forcing national governments and international political bodies to take political and/or military action. In these cases and many others, “NGOs have been a positive force in domestic and

international affairs, working to alleviate poverty, protect human rights, preserve the environment, and provide relief worldwide.” But as James McGann and Mary Johnstone aptly point out, it is for this precise reason that international watchdogs have not “felt the need to take a critical look at the effectiveness and accountability of these organizations.” Indeed, while NGO’s have been heralded for narrowing the representational gap between individuals, communities, economic markets, national governments and international institutions, they have done little in the way of increasing their own transparency and accountability outside of western countries which already have well defined standards and institutions for governing charitable work. (This, of course, is only one side of the story as many organization (such as www.oneworldtrust.org/) have been created to fill this representational gap, promoting “education and research into the changes required within global organisations in order to achieve the eradication of poverty, injustice and war.”

The real challenge of GCS, then, is not theoretical, but practical. Instead of searching futilely for a precise definition of GCS, one must adopt an open-minded and capacious perspective towards GCS so as to not exclude those alternative methods of philanthropy and charitable work which are continually reshaping the loose and baggy foundation which GCS rests upon. Yet while this may seem like a daunting prospect, many tools, information, and resources to approach this task are already in existence. It is at this point that we arrive at the fundamental and practical task-at-hand: to provide an annotated set of tools and resources for and about border-crossing nonprofit organizations. (This list of tools and resources can be found at <http://www.idealists.org/if/i/en/faq/1015-46/308-268>). In doing so, the goal is not to suggest a preferred means of global governance or to advocate for the existence of some world agency or state to regulate the actions of NGOs, but instead to create a list of tools and resources which individual donors, volunteers, organizations, and observers can utilize to better navigate the often tricky waters of Global Civil Society.