

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM: GLOBALIZATION AND STATE OF CSOs IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

Globalization has redefined the roles of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the global governance system. It has significant share in key political, economic, and societal issues, where a linear perspective to look at the contribution of CSOs has lost its ground. It is not merely a non-governmental phenomenon that defines the scope and nature of civil society's significance. State structures and international development patterns are noteworthy to demonstrate the revival of the state of CSOs. Bangladesh has its fair orientation with this process. Here the current development paradigm in governance sector indicates the change to a new dimension of civil society's activism in the polity. There are different ways to observe this development. A comprehensive understanding is important to major discontents in envisaging the current paradigm of functionality of CSOs.

Although there is a debate on their role, civil societies in Bangladesh are active and strong. Over the years, the country has become a vibrant polity for the participation of various institutions in its development paradigm and governance structure. The involvement of non-state actors in parallel to the state institutions is considered the viable means of development. Furthermore, the global pressure of changing statehood is not a surprising factor for Bangladesh. The pursuits of different reforms in national governance are perhaps a result of experiencing such change. Undoubtedly, reforms create a new space for different entities to perform and thus help contribute to an effective presence of those entities. Globalization, largely being connected with the forces of international dimension, has also been responsible to refine national dimension of politics i.e. state's optimism for democratic political culture. The history of political culture and infiltration of 'liberal democracy' in Bangladesh reflects a different scenario of institutional development from where one can visualize the activism of present

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CSOs. One may argue that the activism is more quantitative in nature. There is a vertical expansion in terms of numbers of institutions in civil society. However, one may also look at the qualitative changes that have taken place in the functionality of CSOs. Its nature of functions, which is identified as 'functionality' in this paper, has gone through serious changes i.e. from a sub-contractual level basic service provider to a technical consultant and prime implementer of development projects. So tasks to define the CSOs on the basis of functionality become difficult in the present time. Exploring a universal approach with the West-led conceptual framework in the functional aspects of modern civil society will not probably uphold its supremacy in the intellectual and practical world of CSOs. The contextualization is very important to critically look at the participation of these institutions. Globalization has brought about diversity and it has contributed to mingle the local taste with international flavor. Keeping that in mind, it would be wise to contextualize the uniqueness of institutions and their functionality so that their contribution can be properly researched without biases.

This paper critically looks at the contemporary functional diversity of the civil society organizations, particularly the new terms of responsibilities explored by them in the governance related development projects in Bangladesh. It investigates precisely the role of the newly emerging policy-making and advocacy oriented CSOs and the service providing NGOs like BRAC; those are actively influencing the governance mechanism in collaboration with the national government and the international development partners. The existing literature shows the deficiency to explain this dynamism that contemporary CSOs are exposing but it remains important because a modest guideline could be gathered by focusing on the knowledge to conceptualize the development pattern. The paper is mostly based on secondary literature and organizational performance reports and classic texts on the conceptual aspects. The paper attempts to apply new modes of thought which will definitely not stick to any traditional mode of investigation and the way how it defines civil society earlier.

What is Civil Society? – The Conceptual Aspects of Civil Activism

The western history of civil society finds its root way back in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and since then the institutionalization process of civil society has followed the spiral streams of evolution. Only in the recent times there has been serious effort to represent the

civil society as the formal and informal groups of citizens that act collectively, in public, to express their interests and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable.¹

The contribution of liberal western political thinkers like Locke and Hegel has had a special effect in the conceptual exposition of civil society. One can say that they have started the discussion about the existence and functionality of this special entity. A further significant development of this era is the elucidation of interrelation between the political democracy (polity) and the social aspect (society) through a space in between it. Many philosophers have also contributed the ideas of individual freedom and inalienable rights of human being, and thus legitimized the necessity of the civil society in the upcoming days. The concept was evolved on its uniqueness to create a space independent of state and market. Its evolution and contradiction with state-arch is diverse and experience in Europe and other parts of the world matches hardly. Nevertheless, basic notion was similar i.e. to cut-off the power of the police state.

Inspired by Hegelian politico-civil space and the existence of civil society, Charles Taylor has mentioned two generalized set of concepts. In the first set, the so-called 'L-stream' (anti-Hegelian) he elaborates a richer view of the society as an extra-political reality. This particular approach is noteworthy because of its relations with Adam Smith led neo-classical economy – where society is expressed as the composition of production, exchange and distribution. Political affairs are seriously abandoned due to the way it separates different modes within the society. Thus it got an extra-political identity. On the contrary, the so-called 'M-stream' reflects the civil society as a composition of politics and society, and thus blooms as subsistence of political society. Quoting concepts from Hegel and later from Montesquieu, the role of political society takes up in a state and elevates the legitimacy of a civil society in a political space.² A kind of fanaticism has been in force in the conceptual development of the idea civil society in ancient sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nevertheless, Hegel has mentioned very clearly about the necessity of the institutional arrangements of civil section of the society on the basis of a symbiotic

¹ Larry Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation." *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1994, pp - 4-17.

² Charles Taylor, "Modes of Civil Society" in Carolyn M. Elliott (ed.), *Civil Society and Democracy – A Reader*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press), 2003, pp 51-62