

Civic Space: Shrinking from the outside in?

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Espacio cívico: ¿reducción desde fuera hacia dentro?

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Abstract

Restrictions on NGOs and others promoting civil liberties have caused alarm about «shrinking civic space» perpetrated by their domestic regimes. Yet because most camps in the world's civil societies are left unmolested (indeed many are growing) and because non-domestic sources of constraint often play decisive roles, there are reasons to re-think the issues and ask how, and for whom, civil spaces are shaped. This exploratory article draws attention to forces set in motion from central, transnational levels that affect civic spaces: securitization; constraints on organized labour; marketization; transnational non-state actors; citizen disengagement driven by state retrenchment; and social media. As problematized in most policy, activist and scholarly writings, outside forces affecting civic space for emancipatory camps are often ignored, despite their being more susceptible to counteraction from outside than are repressive regimes. These issues await deeper investigation and discussion.

Keywords: civil society, closing civic space, NGOs, CSOs, third sector, foreign aid, Agenda 2030.

Abstract

Las restricciones a las ONG y otras entidades que promueven las libertades civiles han causado alarma sobre el «espacio cívico cada vez más reducido» establecido en sus regímenes internos. Sin embargo, debido a que la mayoría de los campamentos en las sociedades civiles del mundo no son molestados (de hecho, muchos están creciendo) y debido a que las fuentes de restricción no domésticas a menudo desempeñan un papel decisivo, existen razones para repensar los problemas y preguntar cómo y para quién los espacios civiles adquieren forma. En este artículo exploratorio, se llama la atención sobre las fuerzas puestas en movimiento desde los niveles centrales y transnacionales que afectan a los espacios cívicos: la titulización, las limitaciones al trabajo organizado, la comercialización de actores transnacionales no estatales, la desvinculación ciudadana impulsada por la reducción del Estado y las redes sociales. Como se ha problematizado en la mayoría de los escritos políticos, activistas y académicos, las fuerzas externas que afectan al espacio cívico para los campamentos de emancipación a menudo se ignoran, a pesar de que resultan más susceptibles a la contrarrestación externa que los regímenes represivos. Estas cuestiones esperan una investigación y discusión más profundas.

Palabras clave: sociedad civil, cierre del espacio cívico, ONG, OSC, tercer sector, ayuda exterior, Agenda 2030.

1 Introduction

Emancipatory movements and trade unions have for generations faced bullying and outright repression, but since the turn of the century, human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and independent media are also meeting clampdowns. Organisations funded by Western donors have been targeted with particular force, eliciting alarm about threats to a «global civil society project». In a scholarly assessment, it is concluded:

Rising levels of restrictive NGO finance legislation are slowing the third sector's global expansion and undermining policy optimism about civil society's ability to further economic development, support democracy, and spread liberal norms. Instead, the Western-supported global civil society project faces growing government opposition in recipient countries (Dupuy *et al.* 2016).

Concerns have appeared in publications, watchdog initiatives, conferences and resolutions, including one adopted overwhelmingly by the European Parliament, «Addressing shrinking civil society space in developing countries» (European Parliament 2017). Such statements reflect fears that civil society organisations (CSOs) will be unable to fulfil expectations, notably to help achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. For a major European association of development NGOs, «the closing of civic space has severe negative impact on inclusive and sustainable development» (Concord 2018).

Hence there is a widely held view that civil spaces are shrinking and that domestic governments are mainly to blame (Christensen & Weinstein 2013, GSDRC 2015a, Hossain *et al.* 2018). With some exceptions (*e.g.* Wolff & Poppe 2015), western observers give little credence to those governments' justifications, namely an insistence that their sovereignty must be safeguarded against «foreign agents». Accordingly, it is unacceptable that governments subject CSOs to «restrictive laws, limits on funding, strict licensing procedures and punitive taxes» (European Parliament 2017). Many authoritarian regimes are urged to relax constraints, especially on outsiders' funding of CSOs. Forgotten in these polemics is the outrage voiced in Western countries subjected to public relations campaigns, Internet trolling and other «soft power» interventions paid for by Russia, China and Saudi Arabia.

Adopting a wider, transnational perspective, this paper signposts a series of other factors that may help account for shrinking spaces. The factors were selected because they: (a) are usually designed and driven from outside territorial or national levels; (b) operate chiefly under the authority and responsibility of well-positioned governments, international bodies, corporations and non-profits; and (c) are under-theorized and under-researched in «shrinking

space» literature. On those criteria, the paper locates factors in six non-exclusive realms: *securitization; constraints on organized labour; marketization; transnational non-state actors; citizen disengagement driven by state retrenchment; and social media*. There is no intention here to furnish an exhaustive survey of externally driven factors. Rather, the aim is to indicate issues that merit closer attention by scholars, donors and civil activists wishing to widen and protect the political spaces for emancipatory camps. It begins by questioning some basic assumptions about the scope and uses of civic spaces and the truly existing organisations and movements that inhabit them. It then sketches impacts arising from the development cooperation sector, epitomized today in Agenda 2030, that shape discursive and policy contexts in which some civil society actors have emerged, and now face challenges.

2 Shrinking spaces, homegrown repression – assumptions in need of revision

The metaphor of «shrinking civil space» is clearly plausible in the light of constraints put on prominent civil rights NGOs and independent media. But is the metaphor adequate? It does not appear so, given that in recent decades, even under authoritarian regimes, civic spaces are in many countries not shrinking but expanding;¹ for example, religious bodies have grown explosively (Haynes 2009, De la Torre & Martín 2016). Business associations have multiplied across the non-Western world (Lucas 1997), showing particular success in countries like Brazil (Pena 2018). A wide assortment of community, sport, cultural, professional and ethnic associations, charities and volunteerism have flourished (see Edwards 2013, various chapters). These manifestations of civil society —at first glance non-political, yet often in pursuit of class and interest group objectives— have been observed even where repression of NGOs is severe, such as Russia (Chebankova 2013), China (Howell 2011), and a number of other cases (Cavatorta 2012). Accompanying that organisational growth has been a meteoric rise in use of Internet and social media.

It is undeniable that emancipatory action and actors in numerous settings face severe adversity. Yet many other camps in civil society face little or no adversity; indeed, some enjoy protection and promotion by the powers that be. Evidently, civil spaces evolve under unevenly applied pressures, on tilted «playing fields». Narrow or broad, those fields often comprise other actors pursuing divergent agendas. Contestation among actors is often a fact of life in civic spaces. Alliance-forming also takes place there. Conflict and collaboration occur in well-anchored public systems of participation

1 Reliable quantitative estimates of change in the many camps in civil society are difficult to create and monitor, as emphasized by Malena and Heinrich (2007). Indeed, with exceptions such as formal religious bodies (for which Wikipedia entries provide estimates in some cases), comparative data are scarce. Literature cited in this section, however, points broadly to expansion in civic spaces across the globe.

(Cornwall 2017), but also in systems suffering weakness and outside manipulation. Interactions within «civil spaces» may aggravate or alleviate adversities. In this perspective, repressive regimes are not the only antagonists for the emancipatory camp.

These dimensions of the «shrinking civic space» issue are routinely overlooked. That is noteworthy, since they are inherent to common definitions of civic space, such as «the political, legislative, social and economic environment which enables citizens to come together, share their interests and concerns and act individually and collectively to influence and shape they [sic] policy-making» (Civic Space Watch website 2019). It may therefore be more realistic to assume that civic space is not everywhere shrinking, but it is evolving in ways that conventional perspectives fail to capture. To see this more clearly, wider lenses are needed, together with clearer terms. The term «civil society» has for too long been «simply a convenient shorthand for the range of professionalized NGOs that continue to be the preferred partners of international development agencies» (Wolff & Poppe 2015, p. 5; see also Howell & Pearce 2001).

Homegrown repression driven by elite fears, ambitions and sheer bloody-mindedness are indeed often at work where civic spaces are shrinking. Yet the main targets of official repression, NGOs championing civil liberties, remain vulnerable to suspicions that they reflect elite or foreign interests. Their legitimacy can be put in question where their funds come mainly from abroad and where their local social anchoring is narrow. But vulnerability and targeted repression are often not the only factors at work. Policies and interventions that shift ground rules and redistribute wealth can also set limits to civil initiative and shrink civil spaces. Some of those rules and changes stem from forces at transnational levels, including the «international community» itself.

Needs to look upward and outward present themselves for at least two reasons. First, civic spaces are usually globalized spaces. Powerful states, corporations, donor agencies and philanthropies of the «international community» exercise strong influences over civil spaces. In what two scholars refer to as «manufacturing civil society from the outside» (Howell & Pearce 2001, p. 89), external interests have homogenized the norms, activities, vocabularies and structures of civil organizations, especially of NGOs (Kamstra & Schulpen 2015, Schofer & Longhofer 2011). Two historical ruptures—the end of colonial rule and the end of the Cold War—demonstrate the power of external factors. Following those turning-points, civil spaces expanded rapidly. Second, a focus on external, «upstream» factors can help identify points of leverage. Within their own political and juridical spheres of influence, donors, activists and policymakers may have firmer grounds to stand on and more legitimate means to act. A conclusion of decade-long research programme on how states and societies build each other, was that

donors should «prioritise action on things that external actors can directly influence, and that are fundamental to shaping the interests of elites in poor countries» (Unsworth & Moore 2010, p. 14).

3 **Agenda 2030, «International Cooperation» and CSOs**

In earlier times, activities in civil spaces used to follow their own distinct national or sub-national rhythms. Today national civil spaces are more tightly coupled across the globe. The spread of norms, such as respect for women's rights, now quickly spill across frontiers. The same holds for collective reflexes, as in the «Arab Spring» in North Africa and Syria or the nativist waves sweeping across Europe today. Civic spaces today comprise actors in different locales, as shown in movements that link African diasporas in Lisbon and London with their compatriots in Luanda and Harare. In short, civic spaces are today marked by transnational, centre-periphery dynamics.

Formal centre-periphery influences include old institutions presiding over official «international cooperation», notably the Bretton Woods Institutions, the OECD and bilateral donors, together with the WTO and powerful financial sector bodies. Legitimized under an aura of public beneficence and endorsed by political classes from Left to Right as well as by most NGOs, the regime of «international cooperation» continues to pursue —up to and including Agenda 2030— policy notions inspired by a faith in market fundamentalism. Under that doctrine, the regime has helped redistribute resources outward and upward —often in the name of combating poverty—. It has helped to weaken public sector capacities (Reinsberg *et al.* 2019a) —often in the name of good governance and democracy—. Orthodoxies of «international cooperation» have helped undermine the fair provision of public goods and services, such as in the case of public health (Kentikelenis 2017). Outcomes vary from place to place, but often include worsened inequalities of income and wealth (Forster *et al.* 2019). These have had horizontal or inter-group consequences (Langer & Stewart 2008) that are commonly at the root of civil conflicts. Asymmetries in power weaken processes that would stabilize expectations between states and citizens. That is, «social contracts» are becoming fragile or breaking down altogether. Politically, these breakdowns have ignited public protest and anti-emancipatory activism (including nihilistic violence, sometimes termed «terrorism»), but also citizen disengagement and passivity. The resulting tensions continue to affect political and economic life across much of the world (Slobodian 2018). Yet such impacts are seldom if ever taken into account in discussions of civic space and why it is shrinking for emancipatory camps.

Agenda 2030 exemplifies a new approach emerging since the turn of the century. It is a management paradigm that prescribes the setting goals and assigning responsibilities. Every country is expected to set its development compass by agreed global goals, and then to take «ownership», that is to assume responsibility for meeting those goals. To these ends, donors made commitments in Paris in 2005, Accra in 2008 and in Busan in 2011, to align their aid with the plans and public systems of recipient governments. In adopting their «Principles on Aid Effectiveness», donors pledged to avoid use of implementation structures that by-pass public systems. Some governments, such as in Egypt and Ethiopia, refer to that pledge when justifying restrictions on external support to NGOs. Yet at the same time donors wished to expand their reliance on non-state (for-profit and non-profit) aid channels. They therefore quietly dropped the commitment to stop by-passing public systems, and they substituted broader and vaguer objectives about respecting «country systems» while adding objectives meant to promote CSOs and public-private partnerships (OECD/UNDP 2016). The aid system's reliance on international NGOs and to a lesser extent on domestic NGOs as delivery vehicles continues (OECD-DAC 2018). The instrumentalization of NGOs —something detected many decades ago— is intensifying, reinforced by systems of competitive tendering, technocratic management and performance auditing. In Latin America (see for example Dagnino 2010, Kervran 2017, Rocha 2017) and elsewhere, ever more NGOs serve as conveyor belts in the machinery of official aid and its private counterparts in charitable giving and philanthropy. These circumstances, and NGO strategies that result from them, are less and less favourable to vibrant civil spaces or emancipatory collective action.

4 Reshaping spaces from the outside in

The following sub-sections discuss six fields in which civil spaces are subject to pressures at territorial levels but also, and especially, to pressures operating transnationally. While by no means the only fields meriting further research and debate, they stand out by their relative neglect in scholarly and policy literatures on «shrinking civic spaces».

4.1. Securitization

Western security scripts have cast CSOs in two kinds of roles. In one, they are sources of problems; they, or those they defend, pose risks to security. In the other kind of role, CSOs are sources of solutions; as service providers and as watchdogs they are sup-

posed to help police and contain risks to security as Western powers define them.

4.1.1. CSOs as sources of security risks

Since biblical times, threats to the established order have been seen to lurk in populations at large. Popular discontent manifests itself in camps or factions in civil society. Depending on how power holders choose to frame them, these camps can face official hostility. Official countermeasures range from vilification to co-optation to outright destruction. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the face of this hostility, the long marches for emancipation of racial minorities, waged workers, women and entire nations under colonial or aristocratic rule began in civil society (Bermeo & Nord 2000). By the same token, and often at the same time, violent and anti-emancipatory movements such as fascism and religious nationalism are cultivated through civil society.

Thus, while not unprecedented, measures taken in the name of anti-terrorism have narrowed civil spaces around the world. Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, policies devised in Washington DC were replicated rapidly in the UK and the European Union (Hayes 2013). Out of solidarity, obedience or opportunism, governments from Australia to Zimbabwe followed suit. They drew up or copied blacklists of CSOs with the aim of neutralizing them, chiefly by curtailing flows of money from Western donors. Some governments have, by conflating cybersecurity with national security, criminalized civil access to information, thus limiting the basis for public knowledge and debate.

Some donors and civil society bodies have pushed back. But in an overheated climate of fear, the easier path is to comply with rules imposed in the name of security. As early as 2006, a UN Special Rapporteur had begun calling attention to «anti-terror» restrictions on rights of peaceful assembly and of expression in Korea, Uruguay, Turkey and many other countries (United Nations 2006). Among the many Orwellian re-framings under this «global state of emergency», peacemaking initiatives with CSOs were put under suspicion as channels of support for terrorism. Donors and NGOs faced rules that criminalized offering «to listed organisations any service that can be construed as having tangible or intangible money value, including training, expert advice or assistance aimed at turning armed groups away from violence and advise them to join a negotiating process» (Dudouet 2011, p. 10). Yet civic spaces continue to face yet tighter constraints, evoking stronger counter-reactions, in zones designated by Western powers as strategically important, such as the Sahel in West Africa (Maïga & Adam 2018).

Western-led measures to stop Islamic insurgencies are widely proclaimed, usually in bellicose terms. Yet some of those blockades show remarkable gaps. Saudi and Gulf State monarchies have for decades successfully ignored objections to their support of Islamic

movements, schools, broadcasting, charities and other elements of civil society in much of the world. The resulting spread of ultra-conservative Islamic doctrine has included strategically sensitive countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Bosnia (Racimora 2013). Via civil society, Islamists increasingly dominate political life in Indonesia; that domination in turn is re-shaping Indonesia's civic space (Suharto 2018). Western powers seem to have cast a permissive eye on Saudi and Gulf State largesse in their transnational promotion of Islamic sectarianism (Curtis 2018, Cockburn 2016). This indulgence is apparent even in NATO countries. In the Netherlands, more than a year after journalists had revealed that the Dutch government had known for a long time of Saudi and Gulf sheikdom funding to dozens of mosques propagating highly reactionary doctrines, the Dutch government seems unable, or unwilling, to intervene. In short, even when the story is about combating alleged existential threats, some civil actors allied with those threats are free to carry on unmolested. Much depends on the «strategic importance» (a euphemism for trade and investment relations) of those providing the money.

4.1.2. CSOs as allies in reducing security risks

In zones that western powers label as «fragile», thereby qualifying them for intervention, Western counter-insurgency strategies regularly involve NGOs. US military doctrine today prioritizes not only armed combat but also socio-economic stabilization. The targets are the «hearts and minds» of civilians. In these interventions, millions of dollars and euros earmarked for «civil society» have flowed into intervention zones. A journalist described the results in Afghanistan as follows:

Kabul has the world's biggest congregation of aid workers and they are competing for the biggest influx of aid money in history. Last year the government revoked the operating licences of some 170 fraudulent or inactive NGOs, but around 1,500 remain. These include Afghan NGOs, fronted by plausible English-speakers bandying about the usual acronym-heavy jargon. Some of them [...] operate as «business operations» – in other words, they have been set up to chase aid (De Bellaigue 2011, p. 14).

Has this massive civil-military collaboration in Afghanistan, over nearly two decades, promoted anything resembling a legitimate political order, let alone a civic space open to all? Independent assessments (Bizhan 2018) fail to confirm such outcomes and indeed point to further deterioration. More generally, in zones of «limited statehood», evidence of NGO legitimacy is lacking (Risse & Stollenwerk 2018). Moreover, their legitimacy in those zones is not improved where their roles follow scripts drafted by intervention forces intended to prop up illegitimate governments in the name of «stabilization» or «nation-building» (Woodward 2017).

In short, political reflexes and military interventions pursued in the name of security have confined civic spaces where activities

in those spaces are thought to pose risks. Meanwhile, civil spaces have been re-configured and de-legitimized where NGOs and other organisations in them lack autonomy and local anchoring. Securitization has turned many into mere servitors of counter-insurgency strategies that one observer terms «social work with guns» (Bacevich 2009).

4.2. Squeezing Organized Labour

Under capitalism, organized labour has been the most powerful force for progressive social change. More than any other civil movement, it has redressed socio-economic inequities and opened spaces for other emancipatory movements, thereby stabilizing «social contracts» between citizens and states. Those spaces are vital. Today, however, a host of forces have crippled the power of people as workers, whether organised in unions or atomized in informal settings. Respect for labour rights has been declining in many places, and at an accelerated pace, as shown in the Global Rights Index compiled by a global trade union body (ITUC 2018). Domestic elites, private sector employers foremost among them, make and enforce the rules of union funding, neutralise trouble-makers, set up «yellow» or company-allied unions and otherwise discourage autonomous labour organising. Further tipping balances against formal and informal sector workers are a host of factors, including: competitive scrambles for survival in the wake of privatization and other austerity policies; collapses of agrarian livelihoods; displacement from land that has been acquired by richer people and foreign-linked agribusiness (as supported by the World Bank and other aid agencies [Mousseau 2019]); labour displacement driven by shifts in technology; and the rise of corporate power to «shop around» for workforces at the lowest price almost anywhere the world.

These mutually reinforcing, cumulative forces seem faceless, having no institutional homes or websites. Yet, most have had official encouragement in policies and incentives steered from the top of the foreign aid system —from which Agenda 2030 largely originates—. Conditions attached to loans by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, with full cooperation from bilateral donors, have worsened respect for rights of workers (Reinsberg *et al.* 2019b). On «home ground» within OECD countries, and in non-western lands, political classes have pushed macro-economic policies that set limits to «decent work» and that promote labour relations riven by precarity and atomization. In addition, they have promoted measures that reduce the rights and civic spaces for organised labour. Scholars who have surveyed the literature and synthesized data have concluded:

Taken as a whole, donor policy prescriptions do not formally undercut core labour rights since they do not explicitly disallow unions or take away

the right to strike. Yet in practice these policies undermine the power of labour organisations. In particular, a push for enhanced labour flexibility or the privatisation of public sector industries undercuts safeguards such as wage stability and pension protection. Reduced state spending, another common requirement of donor programmes, translates into drastic reductions in the public sector workforce, a part of the labour pool that is often unionised. In addition to undercutting the power of public sector unions, such policies reduce the total proportion of the workforce that operates under collective bargaining organisations (Blanton *et al.* 2017, p. 7).

Despite some positive noises in the aid system, such as concerns expressed in IMF publications about rising inequality, donors remain wedded to market fundamentalism. They see organized labour as too strong; they argue that statutory protections it enjoys are harmful and should be further weakened (Reinsberg *et al.* 2019b). The World Bank's recent *World Development Report*, whose theme was work and workers, has nothing positive to say about organized labour or labour rights, apart from one off-hand mention of «mechanisms to expand workers' voices» as «a worthy goal» (World Bank 2019, p. 118). In a strong response to this report, eight major union confederations and 75 other CSOs wrote to the World Bank's leadership, explicitly noting its failure «to recognise the integral role of strong labour rights» and asking that the report be re-written (PSI 2018). Leverage via other high-level channels is difficult, but not impossible. Some private philanthropies are exploring support to organized labour as a way to cope with «shrinking space» obstacles to continued funding of their traditional NGO grantees. Research and activism on labour rights have begun to yield results, where governments (such as in France, Switzerland and Germany) have moved to force their transnational corporations to reduce risk of abuse of workers' rights in global supply chains (Evans 2019).

In short, civic spaces for organised labour, and for working people at large, have been relentlessly and often deliberately reduced. These losses affect working lives. This repression has cumulative effects on whole societies, widening inequalities. Yet most scholarly and policy-linked discussions of shrinking civic spaces pay little or no attention to what historically has been among civil society's most powerful forces. Nor has there been adequate attention to the ways in which «international cooperation» helps drive that shrinkage.

4.3. Interplay with non-state actors

Blame for shrinking civic spaces usually falls on governing elites, who fear public mockery or outright loss of power. Those elites shrink civic space by way of administrative rules, such as for registration and reporting, public accounting, membership and tax liabilities. They may also limit or prohibit access to information, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly (Buyse 2018).

Beyond legal edicts and other formal measures, enforcement also takes place through informal pressures ranging from smear campaigns via (social) media to threats by «out-sourced» purveyors of violence.

Unsurprisingly, the hardest blows fall on those in emancipatory camps critical of ruling regimes. But such regimes often act on behalf of their allies in agrarian, extractive and other industries. Those allies' grip can be so tight that one can speak of state capture by private interests. Yet in discussions of civic spaces and why they shrink, these interests remain under-illuminated. Foreign corporations discreetly collude with state authorities (or their unofficial militias) in neutralizing activists. Victims include those calling for clean environments and decent working conditions in oil-producing zones of Nigeria, forested areas of Brazil and Indonesia and diamond zones of northern Angola. Journalists visiting the remote centre of uranium mining in Niger, where the French mining corporation Areva holds sway, were told by a local NGO leader, «if either Areva or the government were to find out you're poking your nose in their business, they'll go to any length to make your work very difficult» (Destrijcker & Diouara 2017). Accounts of how powerful extractive companies routinely shrink civic spaces appear in publications such as *Tricky business: Space for Civil Society in Natural Resource Struggles* (Terwindt & Schliemann 2017) and in the 2015 *Annual Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association* (United Nations 2015).

Threats to social norms and cultural hierarchies also trigger repressive reflexes. Outside crusaders can help prompt such reactions. Fundamentalists of various religious persuasions have teased out and enflamed latent prejudices about women and minorities. Repression of homosexuality has gotten new boosts from fundamentalist Christians (Oliver 2013). The award-winning film *God Loves Uganda* (2013) highlights how conservative American Christians successfully promoted homophobia in Uganda. Helping enable the forward march of Christian fundamentalism have been governments of the United States, Canada and Britain, whose policies in recent decades have favoured faith-based organisations as channels of foreign aid (McCleary 2009, Clarke 2013).

The enormous success of charismatic or neo-Pentecostal churches in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and countries like South Korea and Papua New Guinea due largely, however, to private war-chests for evangelization. Public subsidies, usually through tax privileges, help account for this spending power. Civic spaces are thus growing with resources that are both external —faith-based organisations, charitable activities and business models from abroad— and internal —«home grown» initiatives built by believers according to own precepts and models—. More help to conservative religious groups may come from well-positioned «champions» within gov-

ernment, as seen in settings as diverse as Myanmar, Zambia and Bolsonaro's Brazil. In the assembly halls of these religious bodies, people from lower-income strata are far better represented than in the NGOs commonly equated with «civil society». Their pursuit of conventional civil society themes of human rights and development are more muted, if at all present. But there is little doubt that in sheer numbers, assets and prominence in the public eye, faith-based organisations loom large in civil society. In terms of civic space, these bodies rarely face the wrath of those with earthly powers, in government or business. Meanwhile from India to Brazil to Eastern Europe, other currents, such as against women's emancipation (Blee & Deutsch 2012), have emerged transnationally to influence public debate and law-making, with intimidating effects on emancipatory camps in civil society.

Islamic organisations occupy civic spaces in camps usually distant from mainstream camps. Most writings about civic space omit them. Yet over the past fifty years in Asia and Africa, Islamic congregations, charities, schools and other cultural bodies have expanded enormously. Driving that growth have been, as in the case of charismatic Christian churches, popular hunger for recognition and respect and needs for social solidarity. However, petrodollar donors have played decisive roles. With proselytizing zeal, and in competition with Western/Christian NGOs, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf kingdoms have poured resources into Africa, Asia and Europe in support of cultural, educational and charitable activities. Islamic groupings have faced ostracism, such as in Afghanistan, where certain Islamic movements are wholly excluded from officially tolerated «civil society». At the other extreme, some groupings enjoy official endorsement to the point of virtual absorption into the ruling political class, such as in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, where civic space not under elite leadership is «extremely circumscribed» (Benthall 2017, p. 31). In other places, however, organizational vehicles for Islamic civil activism are diverse, and becoming more differentiated as social stratification hardens, despite appeals for unity of the *ummah*, the ideal community of believers (Hadiz 2014).

In short, it is not only government autocrats and military chieftains who restrict civic spaces for emancipatory initiatives. Non-state actors pursuing material interests —corporations, landowners or bankers— often favour measures that confine civic spaces and criminalize activities in those spaces. Also, under-illuminated are nonstate actors whose cultural or religious agendas call for repression of emancipatory camps in civil society. Official toleration and subsidization of those actors, such as exempting them from taxes or contracting them for social service delivery, are re-shaping civic spaces and making them sites of contestation.

4.4. Marketization

What happens to civic spaces when NGOs no longer work with citizens to build countervailing power, but act as entrepreneurs selling services and competing in marketplaces of charitable giving and/or public sector contracts? The explosive growth of bodies identifying themselves as NGOs and undergoing «capacity-building» to qualify as competitors testifies to the power of markets to transform and indeed expand civic spaces. Nonprofits for hire today occupy parts of civic spaces in many countries, as well as in transnational spheres such as in emergency relief and peacemaking.

Orienting this approach since the Reagan/Thatcher era has been the paradigm of New Public Management (NPM). It prescribes that public sector bodies operate like businesses and in turn treat citizens as «customers». In this political strategy of privatization, public services are outsourced in ways that both for-profit and non-profit organisations play roles as «partners» a euphemism for sub-contractors. While this «marketized» collaboration may sometimes be called «co-production», nonprofits perform their contracted tasks at some distance from public oversight and normal accountability. That performance is usually gauged by indicators and timetables and assessed by private consultants. In the name of cost-cutting, transparency and efficiency, there develop expensive, non-transparent, rigid and top-heavy systems that often yield below-standard services.

In terms of political power and citizen engagement, clues appear in a study of outsourcing and decentralisation in Britain, which detected

a contradictory process whereby on the one hand, responsibilities are driven down into new governance spaces at local state and, increasingly, sublocal levels, involving new non-state players but where, at the same time, power and control are recentralised at nation-state and supranational levels. The new governing spaces can thus be characterised as arenas of co-option and colonisation, inscribed with rationalities, technologies and rules of engagement that are internalised by nonstate actors and create privileged pathways for more powerful actors (Taylor 2007, p. 302).

These processes resemble those seen in today's aid system, which shows «persistent practices to push risk and responsibility further down the implementation chain» (Keijzer *et al.* 2018, p. 170). Donor preferences for privatised service delivery via «partners», *i.e.*, NGOs and other non-state actors, is a means of shedding risk while centralising power. For most governments such approaches carry advantages: they reinforce power, and they release the powerful from direct obligations toward citizens. Mainstream donors may express dismay at government repression of CSOs, but when civil organisations start to assert that public goods and services are rights and not matters of beneficence or least of all commodities available to those who can pay, then donors turn si-

lent and quietly close ranks with governments. That donors have little genuine enthusiasm for social and economic rights is apparent in a recent official report on progress toward meeting SDG targets. «Throughout the report —writes a watchdog organisation—, the targets which are invisibilized are those that are most rights-based» (Donald 2017).

The effectiveness and efficiency of outsourcing to non-state actors have yet to be demonstrated. Two specialists in government-nonprofit «partnerships» observe that «the supposed benefits of state – third sector have not yet been systematically evaluated and remain unproven» (Bode & Brandsen 2014, p. 1062). Yet while NPM may no longer set the policy discourse in richer countries where the policy package originated, it continues to spread in poorer countries. There, outcomes for service delivery have been mixed and for citizen engagement counterproductive (Kilby 2004, Denhardt *et al.* 2009).

How has the nonprofits for hire paradigm affected civic spaces? This question has yet to be deeply studied. But there is evidence that the workings of markets for contracts and for charitable giving have led many NGOs to account upward, to the sources of money and future contracts, and to neglect their local social anchoring —assuming they had any to begin with—. In this situation, NGOs are vulnerable. That vulnerability has been exposed with particular force in countries where authorities have curbed external funding and imposed other restrictions on non-profits; in those circumstances, most outside donors simply terminate the contracts, often with fatal consequences for NGOs, resulting in an overall reduction in NGO numbers (Dupuy & Prakash 2018).

Plausibly, then, the growth of civic spaces populated by organisations captive to marketized «partnerships» has helped to shift normative balances and to reduce overall numbers in civic space, to the point that it begins to resemble a partial graveyard. Beyond helping to de-populate them, marketization has also helped to draw civic spaces out of the realm of public discussion and public interest —a theme discussed in the following sub-section.

4.5. State retrenchment, non-state provision, popular disengagement

The past forty years have seen «civil society» promoted but public services retrenched. That is no mere coincidence. While their calls to «shrink the state» are no longer as strident as in the 1980s, political classes continue to insist on fiscal austerity, regulatory and tax competition among countries and cities, and other means whereby gains are privatized and losses are socialized. Relentless cutbacks in spending for health, education and other services and infrastructure provided by public bodies have opened new vistas for non-state providers. Guided by the previously noted formulas

of NPM, governments have outsourced their provision of services by contracting for-profit, non-profit or hybrid versions of the two (Cammett & MacLean 2011). In addition, using slogans such as «Big Society» and «Participation Society», they have encouraged citizens to fend for themselves —as contributors to community organisations, as volunteers and as members of households (Konczal 2014, Cooper 2017)—. In line with those developments, corporations and wealthy individuals engage in safe and prestigious «philanthrocapitalism». Financial titans like Goldman Sachs promote «social impact» investments, which pay investors back both in money and in recognition useful for «virtue signaling» to publics and notably to governments whose tax laws have been carefully designed to afford generous deductions, exemptions or other tax privileges to the givers. In these and other ways, nonprofits in civic spaces play roles as putative «safety nets» to complement and perhaps ultimately replace public social welfare systems undermined by austerity policies that «international cooperation» has helped impose.

Do such initiatives herald wider civic spaces and higher public standing for civil sector actors? Certainly, there is no lack of official optimism about civil society, given the frequency by which it is mentioned in global policy fora, notably Agenda 2030. Austerity measures, land-grabs and other impacts of corporate-led globalisation have no doubt sparked popular protest (Almeida & Chase-Dunn 2018), sometimes with decisive results, as in parts of Latin America (Inclán 2018). While civil activism has inspired innovations in public life —think of participatory budgeting, or advances in sexual and reproductive rights for women—, there are reasons to question optimistic narratives. Among these reasons are:

- First, effectiveness. Even as a crescendo of enthusiasm for NGOs and private charity was building in the 1980s, some held serious doubts about them. One early observer, referring specifically to Latin America, expressed skepticism about a «species of development that [...] maintains the virtues of smallness – but at the same time reaches large numbers of people, transfers genuine political power to the poor, and provides high quality social services that are delivered by permanent, adequately financed institutions» (Annis 1987). The validity of those doubts has now been demonstrated in many cases. Despite a regular cascade of heartwarming anecdotal accounts and laudatory evaluations, the evidence is really quite mixed that outside support routinely boosts citizen «voice», thereby making public authorities more responsive to citizens at large. These underwhelming results appear in books and literature surveys (e.g., Bebbington *et al.* 2008, GSDRC 2010, GSDRC 2015b). A major UN think-tank, prescribing ways forward on Agenda 2030, concluded that: «Palliative, patchwork and *ad hoc* interventions to mitigate social costs of economic policy have done little against

the drivers of social exclusion and economic stagnation: far from being transformative, they have reproduced the problems they were meant to address» (UNRISD 2016, p. 34).

- Second, the anti-politics of disengagement and disempowerment. In surveys of political effects of CSOs, successes are usually foregrounded, while counter-productive outcomes go unmentioned. An exception is a paper summarizing ten years' research on citizen engagement, which concludes: «As we have seen, citizen action can lead to positive change, but it also can go wrong, leading to disempowerment instead of empowerment» (Benequista & Gaventa 2011, p. 45). Where CSOs have intervened with the aim of fostering community participation, there emerge stories of civil actors being neutralized. Where active engagement and «voice» were sought, only passivity and «exit» remain. Some see NGOs as instruments in the hands of powerful actors who seek to smother protest and disempower citizens. Three urban studies scholars discussing «civil society associations who claim to mediate access of excluded and poor populations to the state» put it this way: «States use participatory forums to offload public responsibilities, defuse protest, co-opt opponents, impose social control and mobilize communities behind a neoliberal agenda. Often, citizen participation is not directed toward social justice at all, but rather ratifies and even carries out decisions that favour capital» (Silver *et al.* 2010, p. 455).

This is consistent with findings about a new service branch that, in countries like the United States, provides consultants to facilitate «public engagement» in deliberations about such things as urban re-development. Civic space, often quite literally, is at the heart of this «democracy promotion» work; similarities with NGO approaches are clear. Yet a longtime practitioner has concluded that in the current context of skewed power, this approach, «far from revolutionizing decision-making, burdens everyday people with new responsibilities without much empowerment and frames elites and industries as saviors of social change even while they don't accomplish much – despite lots of talk of transparency and accountability» (Lee 2014, p. 7).

Where NGOs and charities take up conventional, and politically safer delivery roles, political pressures drop and the *status quo* is reinforced, not transformed. Lower costs have been a standard justification for outsourcing services, but lower citizen expectations and demands, may be part of the political calculus. Delivery of services in non-state hands often create negative feedback loops: minimalistic or arbitrary services dampen impulses to protest and claim rights. Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa (MacLean 2017, 2011),

India (Kruks-Wisner 2018) and Latin America (Holland 2018) show that mediocre, unreliable public services often carry negative political impacts: they reduce citizen expectations of, and engagement with government. Similarly, feedback loops affect the readiness of workers to make claims as workers and as citizens generally (Ronconi & Zarazaga 2015). Research on nation-building, with particular attention to civil society, included the case of Afghanistan and revealed the following:

Public goods are best provided by national and local governments, rather than private agencies, foreign NGOs, or intervening armies. These might be more effective from an economic point of view. But public good provisioning by outside forces does little to enhance the legitimacy of the national government. This can be shown using the Survey of the Afghan People, which has been conducted by the Asia Foundation every year from 2006 to 2015. Public goods projects conducted by foreigners are far less effective in creating satisfaction with the national government or in motivating citizens to turn to government institutions to solve their local disputes, rather than to traditional authorities or warlords. It is even more disheartening to find that Afghans think more positively about the Taliban after foreigners sponsored public goods projects in their district (Wimmer 2018, p. 161).

In broad terms then, despite some distinct achievements, NGOs and charity safety nets look very threadbare; for many citizens, they are not worth fighting for.

Collective action cannot gain traction where citizens see returns as too meagre, or too demeaning to one's sense of self-worth, relative to effort and to risks of reprisal. Such a situation is typical where people face small-scale, temporary, continually changing NGO or charity programmes. Indeed, such insubstantial systems can extinguish citizen interest and engagement. Out of this grows apathy and a «culture of silence constitut[ing] "the third dimension of power", alongside the ability to coerce others and the possibility of setting the public agenda» (Warin 2018). The outcomes —probably, not unwelcome among those who dislike redistributive social policies— include lowered pressures on duty-bearers to meet citizens' wishes, and disempowerment of non-elites. For this reason, a Dutch government research unit, in its study of capacity-building in civil society, drawing on research by others (e.g., Joshi & Moore 2002) noted that:

Of factors associated with stronger civil societies, the performance of democratic political institutions showed the strongest correlations. While causal linkages may run in both directions, the researchers concluded that the stronger driver is from political and economic systems to civil society, not vice-versa. Such findings are consistent with political scientists' conclusions that anti-poverty activism by citizens, their «voice», «loyalty» and refusal to «exit», are more likely to be sustained where popularly preferred services and infrastructure are based on credibility, stability and formal entitlement – all characteristic of responsive public sectors, and rarely if ever characteristic of non-state actors, such as NGOs (IOB 2011, p. 51).

In short, civic spaces can shrink not only because of state repression, but also —and perhaps more commonly— because public tasks have been offloaded and citizens short-changed. Citizen entitlements become matters of beneficence, or mere commodities one must pay for. Political issues then become matters of management and technique. Of course, assigning service provision to public sector agents does not necessarily guarantee the delivery of services. But to out-source public tasks to nonstate bodies is to run even greater risks of failure, since means to call providers to account are reduced or eliminated altogether. Under such circumstances, citizen expectations ease off and authorities feel even less pressure to meet basic duties. Civic spaces shed their active members and constructive relations with public institutions —the basis of a «social contract»— become politically meaningless. Where such causal circuits are at work, driven by austerity policies, civic spaces for emancipatory purposes are unlikely to flourish.

4.6. Media

Civic spaces today are also cyberspaces. In this sense, they are vastly larger and more active than they were in the 1990s. The Internet and new social media have inspired people to challenge public authorities and corporations on an unprecedented scale. New media have enabled both emancipatory and anti-emancipatory camps in civil society to attract more attention, followers and funds, to acquire new knowledge, create new tactics and rapidly undertake direct action. Some civil bodies thus present mainstream media with new opportunities but also competition. In cyberspace, civic spaces have become larger, denser and more dynamic. But for emancipatory camps particularly, there is a major downside: digital hatred. Beyond mere critique, there has come defamation, blackmail, physical threats and incitement to violence. Even where civic spaces are thought to be well-run and well-protected, risks of intimidation are rising. In Europe, a recent officially mandated survey involving 136 organizations stated: «CSOs and human rights activists in EU Member States face physical and verbal attacks, as well as harassment and intimidation by non-state actors, both on- and offline [...]. Most CSOs reported mainly verbal and online threats and attacks or being targeted by negative media campaigns and digital security threats» (FRA 2018).

A former strategist for Facebook who defected from the social media industry has written about the grave risks that industry poses, put it this way:

Google and Facebook Hoover up mountains of data in the service of business models that produce unacceptable costs to society. They undermine public health, democracy innovation and the economy. If you are a member of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar, the misuse of internet platforms for hate speech has dramatically altered your life – or, in the case of thousands, ended it (McNamee 2019).

Indeed, from New Orleans to New Zealand, mass killings continue, triggered via mass social media. New means of individual communication and public broadcasting have radically expanded and enlivened civic spaces, and the intensity of contestation within those spaces. In military jargon, they are a «force multiplier». But that has multiplied risks, as hatred and violence attract attention while reasoned argument and non-violence (which can be boring) attract far less. Apart from these challenges for emancipatory camps, needs for adequate public supervision of cyberspace are urgent —something for which dominant media corporations lack enthusiasm—. Making this problem more complicated are, of course, the risks inherent in trying to control digital «speech» while protecting freedoms to express it.

5 Conclusion

Conventional discussions of «shrinking civic space» focus on the plight of NGOs in non-western lands active on fronts of civil liberties. In the foreground, are challenges donors face to keep monies flowing. With some exceptions, most do not question, or even discuss, the conventional model of «civil society», which consists mainly of NGOs of goodwill, who redress injustice and promote democracy, and who act as valid providers of social services. It is usually taken for granted that local resources are insufficient, and that external funding is essential —a view supported by the policy— and grant-making «international community» of aid agencies, philanthropies and related think-tanks. They concur with donors that monies must be kept flowing. Indeed, one publication (INCLO 2017) takes assertive stances suggesting, for example, that restrictive measures should be denounced as damaging to direct foreign investment, or they should be sidestepped by re-registering NGOs as businesses or by moving their legal domicile «offshore» such as to secrecy jurisdictions. Other observers of shrinking space issue (such as Dupuy *et al.* 2017) point in the other direction, namely «onshore». They urge NGOs to address their main legitimacy problem —the perception that they work chiefly on behalf of outside interests— by tempering their dependence on external donors. Instead, they should anchor themselves better on home ground —a strategy often dismissed as utopian, but one that has proven feasible even in unfavourable settings.

This article, by contrast, takes really existing or «empirical» civil society as its starting point. That allows one to re-frame the issues, and to see that civic spaces are not shrinking, but changing shape, and indeed often growing. That permits analysis of expanding or shrinking spaces for *whom*, and at whose behest. The article presents reasons to look beyond national, territorial levels, and to

consider the power of factors emanating from central, transnational levels that influence which camps grow or decline in civil society. It highlights the vital roles that capable states and public sector institutions can play, especially at interfaces with citizens and their organisations. These, much more than the beneficence of outside donors, can enable and protect participants in civil society, especially those in emancipatory camps. Yet the commanding heights of the aid system, military forces and media regulators evidently lack incentives to see and to curb their own adverse effects on civic spaces, and on goals like those of Agenda 2030. In this article, it is noted —certainly not exhaustively— points of critique of that neglect, in cursory reviews on the fronts of securitization, organized labour, behaviour by corporations and other non-state actors, commodification and marketization of services, the retrenchment of public goods and services, and social media. Those brief observations suggest signposts for further scholarly probing of transnational forces that shrink civic spaces and what strategies may be at hand to expand and protect those spaces.

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