

CHAPTER 27

Civil society and NGOs

Jan Aart Scholte

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A prominent development in the move over recent decades from “international organization” to “global governance” has been the growing involve-

ment of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society actors more generally. Civil society participation goes back to the earliest days of global regulation; however, the scale and intensity of contemporary interactions are of a different order. As of 2022, some 6,100 NGOs have consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).¹ Since the 1990s hundreds of civil society associations attend the Annual Meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, Ministerial Conferences of the World Trade Organization (WTO), annual gatherings around the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and meetings on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Summits of the Group of 7 (G7) and the Group of 20 (G20) can attract large street demonstrations. Questions of global governance have also figured prominently in civil society spaces such as the World Social Forum and Occupy, as well as a variety of populist and religious movements. In some cases, such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO), NGOs themselves are making and implementing rules of global governance.

As global institutions have gained more importance in regulating contemporary society, civil society associations have, not surprisingly, turned more attention to these regimes. Modern political theory has generally conceived of civil society as a counterpart of the state.² However, state-centric conceptions of governance must now be adjusted to reflect altered circumstances where civil society actors also substantially engage with global (and regional) regulatory processes, sometimes bypassing national governments altogether.

This chapter examines forms, consequences, and challenges of civil society involvement in contemporary global governance. The first section considers definitions of civil society. The second maps the various involvements of civil society actors in global regulatory processes. The third section assesses the substantive impacts of civil society interventions in global governance—that is, how NGOs and other civil society groups affect institutional developments, agendas, decisions, discourses, and deeper structures of global governance. The fourth section considers the relationship between civil society and legitimacy in global governance. The conclusion includes several

suggestions for the future enhancement of civil society engagement in global-scale regulation.

Space constraints prevent an elaboration of how the various explanatory theories of world politics depict the role of civil society in global governance. Realist, liberal, constructivist, Marxist, poststructuralist, postcolonialist, feminist, ecological, and other theories interpret the relationship of civil society to global governance in highly divergent ways. Moreover, a study of civil society and global governance could combine inspirations from several theories to form its own synthesis. The selection of a theoretical framework is a matter for each researcher and tends to involve political as well as intellectual choices.

What is civil society?

Like any key analytical concept, “civil society” is open to multiple and often conflicting interpretations. These debates begin with the very definition of the term. What sorts of activities and circumstances does “civil society” cover?

Many researchers as well as practitioners of global governance treat civil society as synony-

mous with NGOs. From this perspective, civil society is a collection of formally structured, legally registered, and professionally staffed organizations outside official and commercial sectors that undertake a variety of advocacy and service delivery operations. This is the civil society of Amnesty International, Disabled Peoples' International, Focus on the Global South, Friends of the Earth, the Internet Society, the Nuclear Threat Initiative, Oxfam, Tax Justice Network, Women's Environment and Development Organization, and so on.

Yet the equation of civil society with NGOs can be overly narrow. Such a conception tends to ignore many informal and grassroots engagements of global governance.³ These interventions might occur, for example, through social media groups, paramilitary cells, and spontaneous street demonstrations. In addition, conceptions focused on NGOs often overlook the activities of social movements such as faith groups, labor unions, nationalist fronts, peasant mobilizations, and student initiatives. Discussions of NGOs also generally neglect the important role in contemporary global governance of business lobbies such as chambers of commerce, employer federations, and industry associations. Philanthropic foundations and research

institutes arguably occupy the civil society field as well. Thus, while NGOs are certainly a significant part of civil society, the net can be cast more widely to encompass a fuller scope of nonofficial voices and influences in global regulatory processes.

That said, in another sense, the equation of civil society with NGOs can be overly broad, particularly when the range of activities in question is extended to include service delivery. Many NGOs are today involved in global governance as implementers of projects under contract with bodies such as multilateral development banks and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Yet “civil society” has traditionally been about overtly political concerns, such as relations between authorities and subjects, the dynamics of obtaining and exercising social power, and processes of constructing and embedding norms and rules. Of course, the provision of services such as humanitarian relief, health care, schooling, and policing has political dimensions. However, service delivery by NGOs is often mainly assessed for its efficiency and effectiveness as outsourced policy execution, without explicit attention to the politics of these activities. In such cases treating civil society as synonymous with NGOs can have a depoliticizing

effect that underplays the workings of power in global governance.⁴

In order both to widen and to narrow the field relative to NGOs, civil society might be conceptualized as *a political space where associations of citizens seek, from outside political parties, to shape societal rules*. Such a definition emphasizes the centrality of politics to civil society. Moreover, reference to a “space” treats civil society less as an organization and more as an arena where people congregate to deliberate, strategize, and mobilize. Reference to “associations” indicates that civil society involves group activities, whether through formal bodies or informal connections. Reference to “citizens” signifies that people enter civil society to exercise their rights and fulfill their obligations as members of a political community. The exclusion of political parties is specified to underline that civil society operations do not normally aspire to occupy positions of official authority. However, civil society activities do aim “to shape societal rules”: that is, to influence the principles, norms, laws, and standards that govern the collective lives of human beings.

Note also what this conception of civil society does *not* imply. It does not say that civil society is al-

ways wholly and neatly distinguishable from commercial, official, and political party activities: in practice, these sectors can somewhat overlap. In addition, this conception does not restrict civil society to a Western-liberal-modern cultural frame: one can also find civil society among clans, religious revivalists, and movements of indigenous peoples.⁵ Nor does the phrase “civil society” signify anything about ideological outlook: these spaces can be filled with mainstream, reactionary, reformist, or transformational visions: everything from the Global Right to the Fourth International. Civil society is not necessarily “civil” either: this space can be as crowded with arrogance, fraud, greed, and violence as any other realm of society.⁶ The mafia and the Ku Klux Klan also inhabit civil society. Nor is civil society necessarily a level playing field: both the overall arena and many individual associations are marked by hierarchies of age, caste, class, gender, geography, race, sexual orientation, and other inequalities.⁷

Civil society—with its various promises as well as perils—has become increasingly relevant to global governance as more and more societal rules in contemporary history emanate from institutions and processes of worldwide, transplanetary

proportions. For several hundred years prior to the middle of the twentieth century, societal regulation was achieved almost exclusively through territorial states. In such contexts, civil society engaged almost exclusively with individual country governments, and political theorists related civil society wholly and solely to the state. Yet today, when much governance comes from global quarters, considerable civil society activities understandably have become directed at sites such as the UN system, the G7 and G20, the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM), and institutions of private global governance like the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GFATM). So, a twenty-first-century textbook on global governance definitely needs a chapter on civil society.

Civil society involvements in global governance

NGOs, social movements, business forums, research institutes, and other civil society associations engage with global governance in many

ways, both direct and indirect. Modes of *direct* participation include accreditation, membership of government delegations, policy consultations, seats on official committees and boards, evaluation exercises, and actual global regulation itself. With *indirect* engagement, civil society groups seek to shape global governance institutions via third parties such as governments, political parties, and the mass media. In other cases, civil society associations involve themselves in global governance by openly resisting it through street demonstrations and other defiance.

Direct participation

Direct participation by civil society actors in global governance processes dates back to the early international organizations.⁸ For example, employer federations and trade unions have worked alongside governments in the International Labour Organization (ILO) since its beginnings in 1919. The Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO) was set up in 1948. Some 250 NGOs assembled around the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972.⁹

However, the main growth of civil society participation in global governance has occurred since the 1990s. This period has seen most major public global regulatory bodies establish offices for liaison with civil society groups. The World Bank has the largest such provision, with over 120 designated staff for civil society engagement.¹⁰ Several private global governance bodies such as the GFATM have also created civil society liaison bureaus within their organization. In addition, many global governance agencies have in the past two decades formulated official guidelines for their staff's relations with civil society organizations.

One formalized way that civil society associations can be involved in global governance is through accreditation. In this case, a global regulatory institution accords approved citizen groups official recognition and related possibilities to observe and intervene in its policy processes. The most elaborate civil society accreditation scheme exists in respect of the United Nations. NGOs apply and if accepted obtain different degrees of access to UN buildings and deliberations, depending on whether they hold "general consultative status," "special consultative status," or "roster status."¹¹

In other contexts, civil society associations can apply for short-term accreditation with a global governance body in order to attend a particular meeting. An accreditation badge gives approved civil society actors entry into official meeting areas and in some instances also a right to speak in the proceedings. The UN operates such arrangements in respect of global gatherings such as the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) on climate change and other summits on food, health, population, social development, and further issues. Likewise, the IMF and the World Bank have civil society accreditation schemes for their Annual and Spring Meetings, while the WTO permits vetted civil society groups participation in its Ministerial Conferences. Hundreds of civil society associations typically obtain accreditation for such global governance events.

Sometimes certain civil society actors are invited to be members of government delegations to global governance meetings. In these situations, civil society actors have a formally equivalent status to government officials. For example, a number of small island developing states have invited NGO advisers to their official teams in global conferences on ecological matters. Officers from business as-

sociations and development NGOs have regularly joined the delegations of some governments at WTO meetings.

Much additional civil society participation in global governance occurs through ongoing policy consultations in between the big conferences. For this purpose, the UN maintains a Department of Public Information (DPI) and a Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS). Since the 1990s the so-called Arria Formula has opened space for civil society associations to brief members of the UN Security Council, particularly on issues of human rights and humanitarian intervention.^{[12](#)} Among specialized agencies, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) has convened a Global Major Groups and Stakeholders Forum since 2000, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) has had a Civil Society Advisory Committee also since 2000. The World Bank consults civil society groups on the design and implementation of most of its projects and programs. IMF teams normally meet with some local civil society groups during their country visits to advise governments on macro-economic policy. Since 1998 the WTO has accepted some submissions from civil society groups in its dispute settlement process. The Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) maintains regular consultations, *inter alia*, through its Business and Industry Advisory Committee (BIAC) and Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC). ICANN does the same through its At-Large Advisory Committee (ALAC) and Noncommercial Users Constituency (NCUC). Since 1965, the Commonwealth Foundation has assembled civil society groups, while the Commonwealth Secretariat has focused on the member governments. The GFATM engages local civil society for its country activities and also holds a biennial Partnership Forum with civil society actors from around the world. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also holds some informal interactions with NGOs. Through these numerous formalized and ad hoc practices, consultation with civil society has become a norm of contemporary global governance.^{[13](#)}

To be sure, global governance consultations of civil society have not always gone far and deep. Indeed, the preparation, execution, and follow-up of these dialogues can be wanting. For example, “consultation” of civil society may occur late in the policy-making process, after important decisions have already been taken. In addition, global governance officials can undermine consultations

with negative attitudes of arrogance, inflexibility, reluctance, and secrecy. For their part, civil society associations can neglect opportunities to engage with global governance and/or can bring to the table inaccurate information and underdeveloped analysis. The quality of global governance engagement of civil society has also suffered, both democratically and substantively, when the consultations disproportionately involve associations from privileged quarters, marginalizing disadvantaged geographical, social, and cultural circles.

Beyond consultation, in certain cases, civil society associations have obtained formal representation at the decision table in global governance. In addition to the already mentioned ILO tripartism, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) involves trade associations, professional societies, and universities in its technical committees. Civil society actors have also held several seats on the board and committees of ICANN and on the global board and the country coordinating mechanisms of the GFATM.¹⁴ NGOs and social movements figure prominently in the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), which channels policy recommendations into the UN system.¹⁵ The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is one of several schemes for

corporate social responsibility (CSR) that involve business, labor, and NGOs along with government. To be sure, civil society membership of official boards and committees remains far from the norm in contemporary global governance; nevertheless, the spread since the late 1990s of so-called “multi-stakeholder” arrangements is striking.¹⁶

Civil society associations also participate in global governance through performance evaluations. For example, think tanks have conducted commissioned official policy reviews for ICANN, and NGOs have contributed to investigations by the IMF’s Independent Evaluation Office, established in 2001. Civil society groups have also brought various cases to the World Bank’s Inspection Panel since its creation in 1994. In addition, civil society organizations are continually publishing their own (often critical) assessments of global governance institutions and policies, thereby serving an important external monitoring function, and contributing to public awareness and debate.

Finally, among modes of direct participation in global governance, certain civil society bodies act as regulatory bodies. In these cases, it is the civil society associations themselves who do the formulation and administration of global rules,

without direct involvement by official actors. For example, the FSC regime for sustainable forestry involves collaboration between business, environmental, indigenous, and labor groups. The WFTO framework of fair-trade standards assembles consumer and producer associations. Other examples of global governance by civil society organizations include the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC, providing sustainability standards in fisheries) and the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC, suggesting labor codes in the sourcing of university and college apparel).

Indirect involvement

In countless other instances, civil society associations pursue involvement in global governance indirectly, through third parties. For example, business forums, trade unions, and NGOs commonly bring their concerns about global governance to member states, in hopes of influencing the positions that governments take in global institutions. In this vein, civil society groups have engaged foreign ministries regarding the UN, finance ministries regarding the G7, communications ministries regarding ICANN, and so on. Indeed,

some governments actively solicit civil society inputs before attending major global conferences. Sometimes states (especially the major states) are targeted on global governance matters not only by civil society associations from their own country, but also by transnational organizations. Thus, for instance, Global Unions and Oxfam International maintain offices in Washington, DC, in order to engage US government departments as well as the Bretton Woods institutions.

In other cases, civil society groups take questions of global governance to the legislative branch of government—for example, the Parliament of India, the Japanese Diet, and the US Congress. Civil society groups in these situations seek to shape parliamentary debates on global governance and/or to engage parliamentary committees that scrutinize government policy on global governance. Occasionally, as in Malawi, civil society associations have sponsored workshops and other activities to raise the capacities of national parliamentarians to address issues of global regulation. In respect of the European Union (EU), civil society associations have also gone to a regional parliament on global governance matters, particularly in the area of

trade, where the EU is a member of the WTO in its own right.

More generally, too, regional institutions can be indirect channels to global governance for civil society. The European Commission continually addresses global issues, and civil society groups have engaged with various of its directorates-general. In Latin America, Mercosur (Common Market of the South) has an Economic and Social Consultation Forum in which civil society representatives *inter alia* discuss global issues. Similarly, civil society has been involved with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) on global governance questions such as debt, HIV/AIDS, and trade.^{[17](#)}

Engagement with substate authorities, as well, can be a mode of indirect civil society involvement in global governance. For example, ecology campaigners have urged hundreds of “greening cities” in the United States to back the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change when the Bush and Trump administrations rejected these global instruments. Other civil society groups have engaged global organizations of cities, including United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and Metropolis, which in turn relate to intergovernmental institutions through agencies like

the Commonwealth Local Government Forum and the UN Global Compact Cities Programme.

Multiple nonofficial channels for indirect civil society engagement of global governance are also available. Outside government, citizen associations can take concerns about global institutions to political parties, the mass media, companies, online social networks, and other deliberative spaces such as the World Economic Forum and the World Social Forum. NGOs have sometimes also called upon celebrities to publicize global issues, as when Bob Geldof and Bono amplified civil society demands for debt relief vis-à-vis global financial institutions in the early 2000s. Noteworthy, too, is the rise since the 2010s of online petitions and hashtag initiatives on global issues through platforms such as Avaaz, Jhatkaa, and MoveOn.^{[18](#)}

Resistance

In addition to the direct participation and indirect pressures reviewed above, civil society actors have also related to global governance by refusing it. Rejectionist groups decline overtures to interact with global institutions. Alternatively, these challengers

disrupt global governance proceedings so much that officials do not invite them again.

Resistance movements have on various occasions taken to the streets to protest against what they regard as harmful, undemocratic, and unjust global governance arrangements. In the so-called “Battle of Seattle” in 1999, street demonstrations severely disrupted a Ministerial Conference of the WTO. G7 and G20 summits and IMF/World Bank meetings have also drawn mass protests, particularly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In another resistance tactic, NGO-inspired boycotts of several major multinational companies have promoted the growth of CSR as an informal global governance of production and investment. Street theater, videos, and monuments are other mediums through which civil society groups have expressed renunciation of some or all global governance.

In multiple ways, then, civil society engagement with global governance has become widespread since the 1990s. This is not to suggest that business forums, NGOs, and social movements are displacing states in global governance. However, understandings of contemporary politics which re-

strict civil society to the domestic sphere are clearly obsolete.

Civil society impacts on global governance

Yet does all the civil society activity just surveyed in respect of global governance actually matter? This section explores various possible effects of organized citizen activism on concrete situations of global regulation. The record shows many correlations between circumstances in civil society on the one hand and developments in global governance on the other. The following paragraphs identify five general dimensions of possible civil society impact on global governance, namely, in relation to institutions, agendas, decisions, discourses, and deeper structures.

It is one thing to observe a concurrence of phenomena and quite another to establish a causal connection between them. How can one demonstrate that it was specifically civil society that affected a given situation of global governance? Different theories and methodologies yield

different interpretations of whether, in what ways, and how far civil society has influenced a particular scenario of global regulation. Moreover, it is generally difficult to disentangle the influence of civil society from other forces (e.g., states, capitalism, etc.) that might shape the course of global governance. Greater exploration of these theoretical and methodological issues lies beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is important to underline here that “proving” civil society’s impacts on global governance is anything but straightforward.

Regarding the first of the five types of impact named above, civil society can shape the institutional evolution of global regulation. Citizen associations have often advocated for the establishment, reform, and/or dissolution of one or the other global governance agency. For example, numerous internationalist groups urged the creation of first the League of Nations and later the United Nations. Some 200 NGOs were present at the San Francisco Conference that founded the UN in 1945, 42 of them as consultants to the US government delegation.¹⁹ Proposals to launch the Uruguay Round negotiations that spawned the WTO emanated initially from the World Economic Forum, a high-profile business association. A major civil society

campaign in the 1990s propelled the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Civil society groups have also figured prominently in drives for various institutional reforms of global governance, such as the establishment of the Human Rights Council at the UN, reallocations of quotas at the IMF, and the inclusion of a vote for affected communities on the board of the GFATM. True, rejectionist voices in civil society have not succeeded in their aims to close certain or all global governance agencies. However, these movements have severely disrupted some official proceedings, such as the WTO Ministerial in Seattle. Moreover, the challenge of radical opposition has perhaps made global governance bodies more amenable to institutional reform.

A second general area where civil society can impact global governance is the agenda. In other words, citizen activism can influence what issues are considered in global regulatory processes and with what relative priorities. Indeed, civil society associations have highlighted a number of global problems that might otherwise have received (considerably) less attention. The many examples include arms control, corruption, debt, democracy, disability, ecological degradation, gender, HIV/

AIDS, human rights, humanitarian intervention, indigenous peoples, labor standards, land grabs, poverty, refugee protection, and the use of non-Western scripts on the Internet. It seems unlikely that—without civil society pressure—global governance would have addressed such questions, or at any rate given them as much prominence.

In addition to institutional change and agenda formation, civil society pressure can be linked to a host of policy decisions taken in global governance. For instance, the WTO move in 2003 to relax intellectual property provisions on essential medicines followed a concerted NGO campaign. Persistent civil society mobilization likewise fed into the reduction and cancellation of many debts of low-income countries in the 1990s and 2000s, as well as the adoption of the Paris Agreement on climate change in 2015. Civil society associations have arguably also contributed to ratifications of global human rights instruments, initiatives to undertake humanitarian intervention, adjustments to many World Bank projects, and countless other policy decisions in global governance.

In a fourth type of impact, civil society involvement can go beyond individual decisions to shape the discourses of global governance. By “discourse”

is meant here the overarching concepts, language, and analytical framings that are employed in political discussions. Civil society associations have arguably furthered innovations in the core vocabulary of global governance by promoting notions such as “fair trade,” “human security,” “sustainable development,” and “global public goods.” More generally, civil society critiques have encouraged shifts in discourses of global economic governance from a *laissez faire* neoliberalism that prevailed in the late twentieth century to the contrasting rhetoric of both responsible capitalism and anti-globalism in the early twenty-first century.

Fifth and finally, civil society impacts can reach still deeper to influence the underlying social structures—the primary ordering principles—of global governance. To give one example, by circumventing states to engage directly with global regulatory institutions, civil society associations have promoted a shift in the overall mode of governance from statism (where societal rules emanate more or less entirely from the state) to polycentrism (where governance transpires through multi-actor networks). In addition, civil society involvement in global governance has, by mobilizing multiple types of political community besides nations (e.g.,

solidarity on lines of caste, class, faith, gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.), encouraged a shift in the primary structure of identity in world politics from nation-centrism to greater pluralism. Also, inasmuch as citizen activism on global governance has enlarged political space for indigenous peoples, religious revivalists, and vaccine skeptics, civil society has facilitated challenges to the predominant modern-rationalist knowledge structure in today's world.

Considering in sum these five types of impact—on institutional evolution, agenda formation, policy decision, discourse construction, and deeper structure—is civil society a force of continuity or change in global governance? Moreover, to the extent that civil society brings changes to global governance, do these alterations have more of an incremental reformist character or more of a systemic revolutionary quality? In Gramscian terms, is civil society on the whole a hegemonic force that reinforces and legitimates established interests in global governance; or does civil society play a counter-hegemonic role of subversion and transformation?

Clear and definitive answers to these questions are not available. The picture is messy partly be-

cause evidence from civil society involvement in global governance often points in several directions at once, or varies substantially from one part of the world to another, or between one policy field and another. In addition, different theories emphasize different kinds of evidence and/or interpret the same data in highly different ways. Cumulative experience certainly suggests that civil society has an impact on contemporary global governance, but the precise significance is and will remain debated.

Civil society and legitimacy in global governance

In addition to the substantive impacts considered above, it is important also to assess the attitudinal consequences that civil society might have for the legitimacy of global regulation. Legitimacy refers to a condition under which political subjects believe that a governing power has the right to rule and exercises that right appropriately. As a result of having such foundational support, a governing institution can secure larger mandates, attract more participation, acquire more resources, take more

decisions, obtain more compliance, and generally have greater impact. Without legitimacy, a governance apparatus survives largely through trickery, coercion, and/or violence toward its subjects—or collapses altogether.

Shortfalls in legitimacy are a major problem for much of contemporary global governance. Challenges such as climate change, financial instability, pandemics, and humanitarian crises demand enlarged and strengthened global regulation. However, on the whole, citizens currently ascribe only medium-to-low legitimacy to global governance organizations.^{[20](#)} As a result, global institutions have often struggled to acquire the necessary capacities to deliver effective global public policy.

Many cosmopolitan commentators hope that civil society might enhance the legitimacy of global governance and thereby promote more effective responses to urgent planetary problems.^{[21](#)} As an arena of public deliberation and mobilization, civil society offers major possibilities to link citizens with global issues, global organizations, and global rules. Indeed, at a time when global political parties, global parliaments, and global plebiscites seem remote prospects, civil society could provide some

of the greatest available potential for a democratization of global governance.^{[22](#)}

Certainly many civil society associations have highlighted democratic frailties that afflict most existing global governance arrangements, and have urged corrective action. NGOs and social movements have also furthered democratic global governance when they provide channels of voice and influence for affected people, including in particular constituencies (e.g., indigenous peoples and sexual minorities) that tend otherwise to be silenced in global politics. Civil society groups have often worked to make global governance institutions more transparent and more consultative vis-à-vis implicated publics. Many civil society organizations have in addition promoted learning and debate about global issues and their regulation, so that people can undertake more informed and empowered actions in respect of global governance. Civil society actors have moreover often served as watchdogs who scrutinize global governance in the public interest. Advocacy groups have also regularly demanded redress for harmed people when global regulatory agencies have caused damage. And numerous civil society initiatives have urged, on social-democratic lines, a progressive

redistribution of world resources, to create a more level playing field in global politics.

That said, the relationship between civil society and democracy in global governance is not unconditionally positive. For one thing, civil society could do much more to advance democracy in global regulation. So far, the scale of these democratizing activities has remained quite modest, especially relative to the need. Moreover, civil society interventions in global governance have to date disproportionately involved already privileged circles of society, such as the Global North, urban professional classes, and white men. Also, civil society contains some decidedly undemocratic elements, such as secretive clubs of corporate capital and terrorist cells. Even “progressive” civil society groups often show shortfalls of democratic accountability in their own practices.^{[23](#)} Hence, civil society engagement in global governance does not automatically generate greater democratic legitimacy: this outcome has to be deliberately and concertedly nurtured.

Democracy is not the only basis for legitimacy, of course. Civil society activism can also bolster public approval of global governance by lending it moral force. In this vein, citizen group initiatives

have prodded global regulatory agencies to promote just ends like decolonization, gender equity, human rights, poverty eradication, fair trade, anti-corruption, peace, and ecological integrity. True, civil society also comprises “uncivil” groups of fundamentalists, militarists, racists, and ultra-nationalists; so its interventions in global governance do not always and inherently bolster moral legitimacy. However, civil society pressures have often helped to persuade global regulatory authorities to champion just causes, and such efforts can raise the moral standing of global governance in the public eye.

On other occasions, civil society has enhanced the legitimacy of global governance by improving its technical performance. In this case, people believe that global authorities exercise rightful rule because the institutions deliver operational efficiency and desired outcomes—for example, a working Internet, food security, disease control, solvent banks, etc. Civil society can contribute to this problem-solving source of legitimacy by providing global governance institutions with valuable information, insights, methods, and advice. In addition, civil society associations can, by challenging established policies, provoke a global

governance agency to sharpen its thinking and improve its instruments. Moreover, subcontracted NGOs can sometimes execute global governance policies more effectively than official bureaucracies. Needless to say, when civil society inputs undermine performance—for example, with faulty information or flawed execution—they sooner contribute to a de-legitimation of global governance.

Moreover, some elements of civil society seek deliberately to delegitimize authority beyond the state. So-called anti-globalization movements have opposed particular global governance institutions or indeed the very principle of supranational authority. These challenges are not by definition “left-wing” or “right-wing,” but they have come from various positions on the political spectrum, including certain environmentalists, populists, and socialists. Such movements amply demonstrate that civil society does not inherently support global authority and, on the contrary, can in some cases be a significant force for its de-legitimation.

Thus, the record of civil society consequences for the legitimacy of global governance is mixed. On the one hand, considerable evidence suggests that civil society can bolster important institutional sources of legitimacy for global governance, such

as democracy, effectiveness, and fairness. On the other hand, civil society also includes unaccountable, incompetent, and morally dubious elements. Moreover, some strains of civil society oppose global governance. And there may be situations where coopted civil society forces can serve to legitimate global governance arrangements that in practice undermine human dignity and a good society.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the place of civil society in contemporary global governance. The discussion has identified multifarious involvements by NGOs, social movements, and other citizen groups in global regulation. As seen throughout this chapter, assessments of these activities are much contested: definitions, explanations, evidence, and evaluations go in many directions.

Quite undeniable, however, is that civil society has acquired a considerable presence in contemporary global governance. This involvement looks likely to increase still further in the future. Such greater engagement can be welcomed in principle,

given that civil society offers some of the best possibilities currently available to connect global regulation with affected people on the ground.

Yet, as repeatedly seen in this chapter, civil society practices vis-à-vis global governance have not always lived up to optimistic expectations. Significant upgrades are required if civil society relations with global regulation are more fully to realize their potential contributions in the future. Five broad suggestions can be briefly mentioned in closing here. First, both sides—civil society as well as global governance—could raise their capacities for meaningful interaction, with greater mutual comprehension, improved institutional arrangements, etc. Second, better coordination of campaigns could allow civil society groups to increase their impact, as witnessed in the wide-ranging networks that pursued climate action, debt relief, and the prohibition of landmines. Third, all parties to civil society relations with global governance institutions could make deliberate and sustained efforts to increase voice and influence for geographically and socially marginalized groups, who have so far had limited opportunities for participation and impact. Fourth, civil society associations could more strenuously resist cooptation and reinforce their role as critical

watchdogs of global governance. Finally, civil society interlocutors with global governance could turn the searching spotlight also onto themselves, with more rigorous attention to their own accountabilitys. In the words of one human rights activist, “When you point a finger, you need to do it with a clean hand.”[24](#)

Additional reading

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Notes

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