

DUNCAN GREEN

HOW CHANGE HAPPENS



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CITIZEN ACTIVISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY

I have come across some extraordinary citizen activists over the last thirty years, among them the Chiquitano people of the Bolivian lowlands, the fisherfolk of India's Bundelkhand, and the members of Citizens UK in central London. For centuries, men and women like them have shrugged off the exhaustion of long days spent earning a living and raising families to join with their communities to discuss, organize, and take action. As we have seen, they courageously risk their lives to confront hired thugs and corrupt officials.

They do so for any number of reasons: to feed their families or improve their neighbourhoods, in response to their sense of what is right and wrong, or because working together in a common cause is fulfilling. Supporting their heroic efforts is what has made working in the development business so personally rewarding (it certainly isn't the meetings).

However, I do have one confession to make: in my personal life, I am one of the most inactive citizens I know. I hate confrontation and conflict; I barely know my own neighbours; I'm not a 'joiner'. Nevertheless, I have long been inspired and fascinated by people who behave very differently from me. First, Latin America's brave community organizers, and then the great activists from around the world I have had the privilege to meet through my work at Oxfam. Hypocrisy? Perhaps. I will just have to live with the gulf that separates their lives from mine. At least my son Calum works as a Citizens UK

organizer in Peckham in South London.¹ Does that get me off the hook?

This chapter delves a little deeper into who citizen activists are, how they pursue change, and what outsiders can do to help.

Citizen activism has grown exponentially across the developing world, driven by several factors: rapid increases in literacy and access to education (particularly for women), a greater openness to political activity, and the spread of new norms regarding rights and justice. Urbanization too: with exchanges of opinions and information on every street corner, cities are vividly political places, dense with social movements demanding housing, schools, clinics, or decent water and sanitation. Protest and conflict abound, between workers and employers or service providers and users. (The more I see of urban citizens' movements, the more I am baffled by the rural bias of many aid agencies, who seem to prefer villages to shanty towns, even if that means missing many opportunities to support social change.)²

Technology plays a part, most recently through the spread of social media and mobile telephones, which greatly expand the possibilities of networking among large groups. Their impact amid the chaos of street protests, however, is often exaggerated by the digerati. One study found that 93 per cent of communications between activists in Cairo's Tahrir Square at the height of the 2011 protests were face-to-face.³

What is citizen activism?

Citizen activism certainly includes political activism, but it can be much more. A good definition would be any individual action with

¹ Tom Henderson, 'Peckham Votes Yes to Launching Peckham Citizens', Citizens UK, 26 November 2014, www.citizensuk.org/peckham_votes_yes_to_launching_peckham_citizens.

² Duncan Green, 'India's Slums: How Change Happens and the Challenge of Urban Programming', From Poverty to Power blog, 1 November 2012, <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/indias-slums-how-change-happens-and-the-challenge-of-urban-programming/>.

³ Michael Edwards, *Civil Society*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 85.

social consequences, and much of it involves collective activity, including participation in faith groups or neighbourhood associations, producer organizations and trade unions, village savings and loan groups, and funeral societies, among others. Such participation is an assertion of 'power with', and is both an end in itself—a crucial kind of freedom—and a means to ensure that society and its institutions respect people's rights and meet their needs. Active citizens provide vital feedback to state decision makers, exert pressure for reform, or solve their problems themselves, bypassing state systems altogether.

Such 'social capital' is often as valuable as cash or skills. World Bank research in Indonesia found that membership in local associations had a bigger impact on household welfare than education.⁴ By one estimate, voluntary associations the world over have become key providers of human services (especially health and welfare), and now constitute a \$2.2 trillion industry in just the forty countries that were sampled⁵—sixteen times the global aid budget.

The local organizations people form, known in development jargon as civil society organizations (CSOs), complement more traditional links of clan, caste, or religion. Coming together in CSOs helps citizens nourish the stock of trust and co-operation on which all societies depend.⁶

Of course, citizens' groups can also reinforce discrimination, fear, and mistrust; called 'uncivil society' by some, their activities can sometimes spill over into violence, as in the case of religious or racist pogroms, football hooligans, or paramilitary organizations. At the time of Rwanda's 1994 genocide, the country had the highest density of voluntary associations in sub-Saharan Africa.⁷

⁴ Michael Edwards, *Civil Society*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 92.

⁵ Michael Edwards, *Civil Society*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 13, footnote 15.

⁶ Jude Howell and Jenny Pearce, *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), p. 31.

⁷ Michael Edwards, *Civil Society*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 51.

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Nor are CSOs immune from the wider power inequalities in society. Men often dominate them, as do individuals from powerful ethnic or caste backgrounds. CSOs of hitherto marginalized groups have often emerged as splinters from mixed organizations, when women or indigenous or HIV-positive people found that their specific concerns continually evaporated from the agenda.

CSOs' work is often local and below the media radar, pushing authorities to install street lighting, pave the roads, or invest in schools and clinics. CSOs often run such services themselves, along with public education programmes on everything from hand washing to labour rights. Even in the chaotic, dangerous world of the Eastern Congo (DRC), Community Protection Committees made up of six men and six women elected by their villages have brought new-found confidence and resilience to conflict-affected communities. They identify the main threats and actions to mitigate them. When people are forced to flee renewed fighting, these committees are often instrumental in getting people organized in their new refugee camps.⁸

For the UN, CSOs include everything from small, informal, community-based organizations to the large, high-profile, international NGOs like Oxfam.⁹ Many observers distinguish between grassroots CSOs and NGOs: CSOs tend to be membership-driven and local (although some have got very large indeed), can be informal or legalized entities, and are often almost entirely voluntary in nature. NGOs tend to be run by boards and professional staff, with only limited accountability to their supporters. Crucially, CSOs work to advance the interests of their members, whereas NGOs usually do so

⁸ Duncan Green, *Community Protection Committees in Democratic Republic of Congo* (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/community-protection-committees-in-democratic-republic-of-congo-338435>.

⁹ Brian Tomlinson, *Working with Civil Society in Foreign Aid: Possibilities for South-South Cooperation?* 'Annex 1: NGOs and CSOs: A Note on Terminology' (Beijing: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) China, 2013), www.cn.undp.org/content/dam/china/docs/Publications/UNDP-CHO3%20Annexes.pdf.

in the public interest, by running projects, responding to disasters or trying to influence public policy.

Of course grassroots organizations also lobby for changes that go beyond the immediate interests of their members; and many people in NGOs work there because of their acutely personal commitment to issues such as gender injustice. But a large NGO is clearly a very different beast from a village savings group. The distinction matters partly because the relationship between NGOs and CSOs is often fraught with tensions over access to money and expertise, and issues of representation (who speaks on behalf of poor communities?). This chapter sticks mostly to grassroots CSOs, while Chapter 11 covers the influencing work of NGOs.

Citizen activism and protest

Since the 1980s, citizen activists have become prominent in the global media for leading protest movements that have ousted dozens of authoritarian regimes across Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. They have removed dictators in the Philippines and Indonesia, ended apartheid in South Africa and most recently brought down oppressive governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Many autocrats must live in fear that one day tear gas from the protests outside will invade the comfort of the presidential palace, as thousands of citizens gather in the square to demand justice, vowing to remain until they get it.¹⁰

While other factors contribute to political transitions (involvement of the formal political opposition or the military, foreign intervention, and so on), boycotts, mass protests, blockades, strikes, and other

¹⁰ Thomas Carothers and Saskia Brechenmacher, 'The Civil Society Flashpoint: Why the Global Crackdown? What Can Be Done About It?', From Poverty to Power blog, 6 March 2014, <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/the-civil-society-flashpoint-why-the-global-crackdown-what-can-be-done-about-it/>.

civil disobedience by cohesive non-violent civic coalitions have proven vital.

Protest movements exhibit a particular rhythm and structure. One historian of European social movements sees them as passing through ‘cycles of contention’,¹¹ similar to the cycles of state reform described in Chapter 4. The response to explosions of protest is often repression, but frequently laced with reform. As conflict collapses and militants retire to lick their wounds, many of their gains are reversed; nevertheless, they leave behind incremental expansions in participation, changes in popular culture and residual networks that lay a ground-work for future protest. Open conflict is a season for sowing, but the reaping often comes in the periods of demobilization that follow, by latecomers to the cause and reformers among elites and officialdom.

While many outsiders see protest movements as homogeneous (journalists and politicians often lament their lack of easily-identifiable leaders), on closer inspection, they contain smaller, more durable organizations that emerge at vital moments, and then disperse.¹² According to Oxfam’s Ihab El Sakkout, the protesters in Cairo’s Tahrir Square in 2011 exhibited a degree of granularity:

On 2nd and 3rd of February, when the protestors were attacked viciously by regime thugs, the Muslim brotherhood and organized groups of soccer fans played a key role in defending the square (principally by being able to convey quick decisions via their groups, showing extreme courage and discipline under attack, quickly building barricades, managing counter-attacks, etc.), which helped to turn those in the square from a mass of individuals into a cohesive group able to defend itself.¹³

Now, whenever I read of apparently faceless blobs of protest, I look for those underlying ‘grains’ of organization.

¹¹ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 24.

¹² Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹³ Duncan Green, ‘Egypt: What are the Drivers of Change?’, *From Poverty to Power* blog, 17 February 2011, <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/egypt-what-are-the-drivers-of-change/>.

Citizen activism and markets

Most day-to-day efforts of citizens' associations are more mundane than the overthrow of governments, but they are equally important to how change happens. Factory workers, state employees, and small-scale farmers around the world have long realized that getting organized will give them the bargaining power they need to exact a better deal out of markets. Trade unions, producer associations, cooperatives, small business associations, and the like can win fairer wages, prices, or working conditions for their members. Many of them take up lobbying for state regulation or other measures to limit the excessive but hidden power of vested interests.

Trade unions have been at the forefront of the struggle for workers' rights for over two centuries, winning huge advances regarding wages and working conditions, the rights to collective bargaining and freedom of association, holidays, pensions, and a host of other areas.¹⁴

In many countries unions' achievements have been rolled back in recent decades, as corporations and their allies in international institutions and government have gutted hard-won labour legislation. Worker organizations continue to face repression and violence; union leaders around the world confront harassment, rape, and murder. In 2015, almost half of 141 countries assessed had 'systematic violations' or 'no guarantee' of labour rights.¹⁵

In part due to entrenched attitudes in the labour movement that women are temporary, secondary, or less valuable workers, women's organizations have come to the fore in struggling to improve working conditions for the millions of women now employed in factories in developing countries, especially in export processing zones (EPZs), where unions are banned. In Nicaragua, the María Elena Cuadra

¹⁴ The International Labour Organization (ILO) has so far agreed 189 Conventions on almost every aspect of working life.

¹⁵ International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Global Rights Index, 2015, http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/survey_global_rights_index_2015_en.pdf

Movement of Employed and Unemployed Women (MEC) and its 2,000 volunteers helped to win the country's first National Health and Safety Law in 2007, with increased site inspections in EPZ factories to ensure compliance, as well as human rights training for mid-level private sector managers.¹⁶ On export plantations where women make up most of the labourers, women's organizations have also stepped into the fray. In South Africa, the Women on Farms Project helped isolated seasonal workers form an organization to demand a minimum daily wage; after a 2013 strike, the women won a 52 per cent pay increase.¹⁷

Despite the efforts of women's groups and unions, approximately 90 per cent of the world labour force is unorganized, and union membership is declining in direct proportion to the growth of the informal economy. Unions have struggled to reach people working within homes or without contracts, who are determined to hang on to even meagre jobs.

In contrast, the number of independent producer organizations has mushroomed in recent decades.¹⁸ Farmers and other producers are forming co-operatives or associations to improve their bargaining power nearly everywhere. Between 1982 and 2002 the number of villages in Burkina Faso that had such organizations rose from 21 per cent to 91 per cent.¹⁹ In Nigeria, the number of producer co-operatives nearly doubled between 1990 and 2005.²⁰ By 1998 65 per cent of

¹⁶ For further examples of organizing in the informal economy, see Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) website, www.wiego.org.

¹⁷ BBC News, 'South Africa Farm Workers Get 52% Pay Rise', BBC News website, 4 February 2013, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21324275.

¹⁸ For an overview of the issues facing producer organizations, see Chris Penrose-Buckley, *Producer Organisations: A Guide to Developing Collective Rural Enterprises* (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2007).

¹⁹ Jean-Louis Arcand, 'Organisations paysannes et Développement rural au Burkina Faso', CERDI, Université d'Auvergne, France, 2004, in Marie-Rose Mercoiret and Jeanot Mfou'ou, *Rural Producers Organizations for Pro-poor Sustainable Agricultural Development*, Paper for World Development Report 2008, Paris workshop, 30–1 October 2006.

²⁰ Research by Leuven University cited in Proceedings Report, 'Corporate Governance and Co-operatives', Peer Review Workshop, London, 8 February 2007.

all rural households in India belonged to a co-operative society.²¹ Such organizations can win better terms for credit, share the cost of expensive machinery like tractors, and process and market their produce more efficiently, thereby gaining a far greater share of the final market price.

One of India's biggest and best known independent producer organizations is the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which had a million members in 2008 (the latest available figures).²² Born in 1972 as a trade union of self-employed women, its members include everyone from street vendors, to home workers, to casual construction and farm labourers.

SEWA describes its task as 'organising workers to achieve their goals of full employment and self reliance through the strategy of struggle and development'. The 'struggle' part includes campaigns and lobbying for better services for women and against 'the many constraints and limitations imposed on them by society and the economy'; SEWA's development activities strengthen women's bargaining power and offer them new alternatives. SEWA has set up its own bank, health insurer, training schools, and childcare centres.

Civil society and the state: opponents or collaborators?

Where the political system is viewed as inclusive and legitimate, much of the activity of CSOs is channelled into the formal politics of elections or in democracy's daily 'public conversation' about laws and state policy. Many CSOs have ties to political parties, at least at election time, and can be important vehicles for marshalling votes in poor countries and rich alike.

On a visit to India in 2012, grassroots activists in the slums of the city of Lucknow told me the first stage in winning political clout is to

²¹ Uday Shanker Awasthi, 'Resurgence of Co-operative Movement Through Innovations', *Co-op Dialogue* 11, no. 2 (2001): pp. 21–6.

²² Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) website, www.sewa.org/About_Us.asp.

convince the lowest rank of elected officials, known as ‘corporators’, that the slum is worthy of being designated a ‘notified slum,’ and so appear on the political and fiscal map. Corporators then distribute voting cards, which are the only identity papers many residents have.

In the eyes of slum dwellers, corporators are the most approachable, but least powerful, politicians. Above them only a few members of the state assembly are willing to talk to them. ‘The officials are worse, especially the low-level ones, they ignore us or demand bribes. At least corporators listen, even if they don’t do anything.’ Asked why they vote, one responded, ‘We’re positive if our candidate wins, they will provide basic services. When it doesn’t happen, we’re disappointed, but then we wait five years and vote for someone else. What else can we do?’²³

But CSOs are seldom mere pawns in politicians’ games. They have set up crowd-source websites, such as ‘ipaidabribe.com’ in India,²⁴ to expose corruption by corporate lobbyists, clientelist political networks, and the like. Many now monitor government spending, painstakingly analysing what is promised vs. what is delivered, and seeking to influence budget allocations. In Israel, for example, activists from different social movements set up the Adva Centre, an NGO that does research, lobbying, and outreach to promote equal rights for Mizrahi Jews, women, and Arab citizens.²⁵

Lobbying government can be a disillusioning experience, as I found when talking to CSOs in South Africa.²⁶ ‘Party hacks get parachuted into senior administrative jobs, lacking the capacity or interest to perform them properly’, one activist told me. ‘You look at the giant that is government and it’s so difficult to navigate. You never quite

²³ Author visit, Delhi, 2012.

²⁴ ‘I Paid a Bribe’, India, www.ipaidabribe.com/#gsc.tab=0.

²⁵ Adva Centre, Israel, <http://adva.org/en/>.

²⁶ Duncan Green, ‘How to Build Local Government Accountability in South Africa? A Conversation with Partners’, *From Poverty to Power* blog, 18 March 2013, <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/how-to-build-local-government-accountability-in-south-africa-a-conversation-with-partners/>.

know where to push—and nor do the officials! You invest hugely in building intimate relationships only to find they've moved department and you have to start all over again.'

In some countries, CSOs have built new political parties, much as trade unions did to represent their interests in the UK and elsewhere. In Bolivia and Brazil, social movements came together to found the Movement for Socialism (MAS) and the Workers Party (PT), both of which subsequently came to power and enacted major progressive reforms (discussed in Chapter 4). While crucial for policy change, links to the governing party can undermine CSOs' vitality, their leadership poached to become MPs or ministers, or their reputation tarnished by association with the inevitable compromises of political office.

Civil society also finds ways to effect change in more closed political systems, using research and demonstration projects rather than the more risky avenues of campaigns and public protest.²⁷ Officials in one-party systems are sometimes more willing to listen to evidence of what isn't working because they don't have to worry about adverse press coverage or buying political support. In Russia, for example, disability campaigners lobbied successfully to change badly designed laws on benefits by explaining the problems behind closed doors.²⁸

Even in apparently unpropitious areas such as women's rights in Pakistan,²⁹ CSOs have won reforms by working at local level, where the imbalance of power between activists and the state is less extreme and relationships are easier to establish. Participatory budgeting began in villages and towns in Indonesia and Brazil before spreading more widely, and Brazil's renowned Bolsa Familia social welfare programme

²⁷ Duncan Green, 'How Can You Do Influencing Work in One-Party States?', From Poverty to Power blog 8 June 2011, <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/how-can-you-do-influencing-work-in-strong-authoritarian-states/>.

²⁸ Duncan Green, 'Advocacy v Service Delivery in Russia: FP2P Flashback', From Poverty to Power blog, 17 August 2011, <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/advocacy-v-service-delivery-in-russia/>.

²⁹ Jacky Repila, *The Politics of Our Lives: The Raising Her Voice in Pakistan Experience* (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2013), <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-politics-of-our-lives-the-raising-her-voice-in-pakistan-experience-294763>.

was first launched as an experiment under progressive municipal governments.

As noted in Part 2, effectively engaging the state means understanding its internal structures and incentive systems. Framing demands in ways that make sense to politicians can greatly improve the chances of success. Publicly congratulating officials and politicians when they do something right, rather than immediately moving the goalposts and issuing new demands, can help build trust.

A review of 200 citizens' anti-corruption projects in fifty-three countries found that success relied on identifying allies among officials and politicians who could act as champions and sources of inside intelligence.³⁰ An in-depth evaluation of efforts to influence state services in South Africa, Mexico, Tanzania, and Brazil agreed on the importance of champions and stressed the role of alliances with the media, academics, and other players as activists dig in for the long haul.³¹

State support for citizen activism

Civil society can help the state become more effective, and states can in turn promote citizen activism by addressing the different kinds of power discussed in Chapter 2.³² Issuing birth certificates or other official registration to members of excluded groups (lower castes, indigenous, the elderly, the disabled, migrants) can bolster their individual identity ('power within'). So can public education on rights and discriminatory norms and values, or laws that guarantee equitable access to assets and opportunities, not to mention preventing violence against women and other forms of intimidation.

³⁰ Pierre Landell-Mills, *Citizens Against Corruption: Report from the Front Line* (Leicester: Matador, Troubador Publishing, 2013).

³¹ Duncan Green, 'Ups and Downs in the Struggle for Accountability – Four New Real Time Studies', *From Poverty to Power* blog, 5 September 2013, <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/watching-the-ups-and-downs-of-accountability-work-four-new-real-time-studies/>.

³² Duncan Green and Sophie King, *What Can Governments Do to Empower Poor People?* (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2013), <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/what-can-governments-do-to-empower-poor-people-305513>.

The state can also help build the capacity of interest- and identity-based organizations and create an enabling environment for excluded groups to organize and represent their interests ('power with'). Affirmative action for the political representation of disadvantaged groups, as well as initiatives and reforms that promote transparency and accountability, can strengthen citizens' ability to take action ('power to').

Finally, states can play an important role in curtailing 'power over': the excessive concentration of influence and its use against excluded groups and individuals. Strengthening poor people's access to the legal system can cut across all these categories and encourage a reformist rather than a revolutionary approach to citizen activism.

Many states see civil society as a double-edged sword: useful when it delivers services and promotes jobs and growth, but threatening when it seeks a more fundamental redistribution of power. I am reminded of the words of Brazil's great radical archbishop, Hélder Câmara: 'When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.'³³

In what is partly a backhanded acknowledgement of growing civil society strength, more than fifty countries in recent years have enacted or seriously considered legislative or other restrictions on the ability of CSOs to organize and operate. As Russia's Vladimir Putin chillingly explained, 'If you get permission, you go and march... Go without permission, and you will be hit on the head with batons.'³⁴

Models of non-democratic systems, such as China's, may inspire these governments, or perhaps cracking down on CSOs is just convenient. Foreign funding can make CSOs easy targets for accusations of foreign interference, and weak governance and accountability

³³ Personal communication with Julian Filochowski, CAFOD, 1984.

³⁴ Michael Stott, 'Putin Hints Will Return to Kremlin in 2012', Reuters website, 30 August 2010, quoting Vladimir Putin defending a recent crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-interview-idUSTRE67T2J920100830.

structures can open the door to questions about their legitimacy.³⁵ Governments have sought to impede or block foreign funding, or harass external aid groups offering it.³⁶

How can outsiders support citizen activists?

If the rising voice and influence of civil society is widely recognized, how aid agencies should support it, if at all, is far from clear.³⁷ A hundred years ago, during the Mexican Revolution, President Alvaro Obregón is said to have caustically observed, 'No general can withstand a cannonade of 50,000 pesos.'³⁸ The same appears to apply to some CSOs. Based on research in Pakistan, Masooda Bano³⁹ argues that aid often erodes the cooperation that underpins CSOs. When foreign money flows in, the unpaid activists that form the core of such organizations can lose trust in their leaders, whom they now suspect of pocketing aid dollars. In Bosnia, my conversations with CSOs suggest that even their supporters view them as little more than 'briefcase CSOs', only interested in winning funding.⁴⁰

I find such conversations painful, as they force me to acknowledge that the aid dollars that Oxfam has spent so many years advocating for can in some circumstances do more harm than good. But I think such fears are also exaggerated. Having no money can be as big a constraint

³⁵ Ross Clarke and Araddhya Mehta, '5 Trends That Explain Why Civil Society Space is Under Assault Around the World', From Poverty to Power blog, 25 August 2015, <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/5-trends-that-explain-why-civil-society-space-is-under-assault-around-the-world/>.

³⁶ Thomas Carothers and Saskia Brechenmacher, *Closing Space: Democracy and Human Rights Support Under Fire* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014).

³⁷ 'Álvaro Obregón Salido (1880–1928)', <http://axoquen.8k.com/biografias/obregonsa.html>.

³⁸ Stephen Morris, 'Corrupción y política en el México contemporáneo'. Mexico, Editorial Siglo XXI, 1992.

³⁹ Masooda Bano, *Breakdown in Pakistan: How Aid is Eroding Institutions for Collective Action* (California: Stanford University Press, 2012).

⁴⁰ Duncan Green, 'Strengthening Active Citizenship After a Traumatic Civil War: Dilemmas and Ideas in Bosnia and Herzegovina', From Poverty to Power blog, 25 June 2014, <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/building-civil-society-after-a-traumatic-civil-war-dilemmas-and-ideas-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

as having too much, and is much more common. By one estimate, Southern-based NGOs get only around 1 per cent of all aid.⁴¹

If chucking money at CSOs risks killing with kindness, there are more subtle ways that outsiders can support citizen activism.⁴² In preparation for writing this book, I examined ten cases of Oxfam's work on citizen activism,⁴³ ranging from grassroots women's empowerment to the global campaign on the arms trade. Here are a few lessons I drew from them:⁴⁴

1. **The right partners are indispensable:** Whether programmes flourish or fail depends in large part on the local CSOs northern aid agencies choose to work with. Good partners bring an understanding of local context and culture, have long-term relations of trust with poor communities, and well-developed networks with those in positions of local power; they will carry on working in the area long after the outside agency has moved on.
2. **Don't neglect 'power within':** Helping citizens build their power is a deeply personal process that often starts with boosting their self-confidence and assertiveness, especially in the case of women's activism.⁴⁵ Many women experience 'citizenship' very differently from men—even when they share racial, ethnic, age, or class identities. In the realm of formal politics, 'power within' is often a vital precursor

⁴¹ CIVICUS, *State of Civil Society Report 2015*, <http://civicus.org/index.php/en/media-centre-129/reports-and-publications/socs2015>.

⁴² Duncan Green, 'Can Donors Support Civil Society Activism without Destroying it?', *From Poverty to Power* blog, 9 September 2014, <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/can-donors-support-civil-society-activism-without-destroying-it-some-great-evidence-from-nigeria/>.

⁴³ Duncan Green, 'Active Citizenship Case Studies' (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2014), <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-work/citizen-states/active-citizenship-case-studies>.

⁴⁴ Duncan Green, *Promoting Active Citizenship: What Have we Learned from 10 Case Studies of Oxfam's Work?* (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/promoting-active-citizenship-what-have-we-learned-from-10-case-studies-of-oxfam-338431>.

⁴⁵ Duncan Green, *The Raising Her Voice Nepal Programme*, Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-raising-her-voice-nepal-programme-338476>.

to 'power with'; individual self-confidence lays a foundation for setting up collective organizations.

3. Build the 'grains' of change: Success in building citizen activism usually involves identifying and working with its constituent 'grains'—the more durable organizations within movements⁴⁶—which are best placed to survive, adapt, and flourish in the complex and ever-changing panorama of activism and protest. These grassroots CSOs naturally adapt to shifts, grab opportunities, seek friends and allies, and frequently show remarkable courage and endurance in the face of attack. For CSO activists, this is their life, not a project or a plan.

4. Building citizen activism takes time: Gathering individual organizations into a social movement is painstaking work, requiring sustained investment. The timelines for the cases I examined show work stretching back over a decade or more, far longer than the typical aid funding arrangement.

5. Think about working with faith groups: As we have seen, many people living in poverty place enormous trust in religious institutions, which are often central to the construction of norms and values, including those that promote or inhibit citizen activism.

6. Conflict vs. cooperation: Serious change is seldom entirely peaceful, but conflict carries huge risks for people living in poverty. In high-risk environments, the activists opted explicitly for a less aggressive approach; elsewhere, lobbying mixed with confrontation and protest proved effective.

In applying these lessons, outsiders should think of themselves as 'ecosystem gardeners', nurturing diversity and resilience, and focusing on the 'enabling environment' (such as laws that support, rather than impede) and systemic issues (such as access to information or finance). This role implies that outsiders should stand by CSOs through thick

⁴⁶ Duncan Green, *The Raising Her Voice Pakistan Programme*, Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-raising-her-voice-pakistan-programme-338443>.

and thin, in an extended act of solidarity, as they cope with emerging events, no matter if they shift direction or focus. Nothing could be farther from the aid industry's standard approach today, driven by its penchant for short-term, measurable results.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Active citizens are the unsung heroes of how change happens, putting the *demos* in democracy,⁴⁸ holding governments to account, making states and markets work better, and, occasionally, erupting onto our TV screens to drive tyrants and thieves from power. Like the other systems discussed in this book, civil society is complex, unpredictable, and fascinating. By immersing ourselves in its highways and byways, nourishing a curiosity for its endless energy, courage, and innovation, we activists will find not only inspiration but the knowledge we need to better support progressive change.

We will return to the role of outsider organizations in the final section of the book. First, let's explore the role of leadership in making change happen.

Further Reading

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⁴⁷ Michael Edwards, *Civil Society*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

⁴⁸ The word democracy comes from the Greek 'demos' (people) and 'kratos' (power).

