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## STATES, MARKETS AND SOCIETY – NEW RELATIONSHIPS FOR A NEW DEVELOPMENT ERA

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# Civil Society and Civic Engagement in a Time of Change

Becky Faith and Pedro Prieto-Martin

**Abstract** This article draws on contributions to the IDS 50th Anniversary Conference stream dedicated to citizen voice, agency and accountability to explore the shifting relationship between civil society, the state and the private sector, as well as looking at the nature of civic engagement. The role of digital technologies in civic engagement in the context of a turbulent new political landscape is also examined in order to understand the spaces that might be opened and closed by these technologies.

**Keywords:** digital, technology, civil society, social media, citizen engagement.

## 1 Introduction

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) 50th Anniversary Conference ‘States, Markets and Society’ was a chance to reflect from a global perspective on the meaning of citizen voice, agency and accountability in a post-Brexit era. Through four conference sessions on ‘Pumping Life into Civil Society’ we saw a convergence of debates between North and South, reflecting IDS’ universalist perspective on development. As Deborah Doane, consultant and ex-Director of World Development Movement, described it at the conference: ‘... we are all fighting the same battles now’. Three issues in particular loomed large at the IDS conference: the 2016 Brexit referendum vote in the UK and its implications; the rise of populist social movements; and the failure of the architectures of participation to challenge political and economic inequality, even in promising cases like Brazil. Against the backdrop of these events, participants asked – what is the role for civil society?

While the very concept of civil society is contested (Edwards 2014), at the conference civil society was broadly considered as an amalgamation of citizen groups, networks, organisations and social movements, together with institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which operate at local, country or international level. Each country’s civil society results from completely different political histories and regimes of governance, and as such are complex, multi-faceted and

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replicate the wider society they are part of; expressing progressive as well as conservative aims and ideologies.

This article reflects on contributions to the conference stream dedicated to citizen voice, agency and accountability which explored the shifting relationship between civil society, the state and the private sector as well as looking at the nature of civic engagement. As the authors are both members of IDS' Digital and Technology research cluster, the article broadens out to reflect on the role of digital technologies in civic engagement in the context of a new political landscape in which 'new dynamics of collective action are injecting turbulence into politics' (Margetts 2016).

## 2 Spaces for civil society

A conference panel discussing the role of civil society in the relationship between society, markets and the state saw participants sharing experiences of current political threats to civil society, and the potential strengths and weaknesses of partnerships with the private sector.

In terms of the relationship between the state and civil society, we heard how threats to civil society are being felt very keenly in Mozambique, with an increase in government control of mainstream media and social media. These threats have also seen lives lost; a law professor who was a central figure in a sensitive debate about autonomy for Mozambique's provinces and decentralising power was shot dead in 2015 (*BBC News* 2015). Civil society's traditional modes of operation and entry points are under attack (CIVICUS 2016).

Numerous calls are being made for a shift in the roles and dynamics within the humanitarian and development landscape, whereby international NGOs and other more formal development and humanitarian organisations put themselves in the service of social movements and other expressions of local civil society. The 'Charter 4 Change' is one such manifestation of this movement which argues that civil society organisations (CSOs) should play a critical convening, bridge-building and catalytic role as supporters of local capacities. The charter includes commitments to 'support local actors to become robust organisations that continuously improve their role' (C4C 2015). An Oxfam discussion paper suggests that the 'supertankers' of big international NGOs might 'back local CSOs to become more effective rafts' (Green 2015: 15). However, this could be seen as implying that international NGOs can *control* social movements and local CSOs to direct their trajectory, which can in reality go in all kinds of directions.

Conference participants explored ways in which civil society might positively influence the private sector by working together with it, while avoiding being co-opted. Civil society researcher Michael Edwards argues elsewhere in this *IDS Bulletin* that the most interesting examples of contemporary citizen action – be they Black Lives Matter in the USA or Podemos in Spain – are able to engage the market 'within a framework

that is governed by democracy and the transformation of power relations' (see Edwards, this *IDS Bulletin*). Yet this could be seen to be a misrepresentation of the economic policy programme issued by Black Lives Matter in 2016 which, rather than discussing engagement with the market, makes a demand for 'economic justice for all and a reconstruction of the economy to ensure Black communities have collective ownership, not merely access' (The Movement for Black Lives 2016).

Reflections at the conference illuminated the positives and negatives of CSO engagement with the private sector. One speaker from an international NGO saw that economic interests were typically underlying threats to organisers when they were campaigning on issues such as the exposure of land grabs, suggesting that there was a company behind it. But another international NGO professional, reflecting on his experiences of negotiating private sector/CSO partnerships, saw the possibility of 'win/win' in these relationships and gave the examples of the banking sector in financial inclusion issues and the telecoms sector on emergency response. Their work around youth savings in partnership with Barclays is reported to have had positive development impacts that include enabling young women to save for their education (Care International, Plan UK and Barclays 2016).

However, in response to these 'win/win' scenarios others raised concerns about the ability of NGOs to maintain their values. Representatives of the right to food movement in India speaking at the conference talked in disparaging terms about the CSOs such as Save the Children taking money from 'Big Cola' in the form of a grant from the soft drinks company Pepsi but simultaneously working on nutrition advocacy (PepsiCo India 2009). And while a recent Oxfam report on their work with Unilever on workers' rights and conditions highlights the value of working with companies to influence their agency in lobbying governments or working in multi-stakeholder fora, it also calls attention to the limits to this influence, indicating that the company has 'not yet addressed the barriers to decent work in its employment, let alone found a blueprint to do so in its supply chain of 76,000 suppliers' (Wilshaw *et al.* 2016: 7) and recognising that the challenges that remain to ensure that human and labour rights are respected are 'systemic in nature' (*ibid.*: 71).

In terms of civil society's relationship with the state, discussions identified the failures of conventional 'civil society' to achieve progressive change that addresses global challenges. Recent publications from the World Bank focusing on politics and governance (Khemani 2016; World Bank 2017, forthcoming) signal a growing awareness by CSOs of the importance of politics for development. This represents a return to ideas proposed 20 years earlier in the World Bank's World Development Reports (World Bank 1997), but it nonetheless recognises the unique role of the state as a politically conscious actor, which moderates the role of the private sector and, ultimately, is responsible for sustaining a healthy balance within the society, market and state triad. According to the World Bank, the key to achieving good

governance is first to obtain 'good governments', which are led by effective political leaders. Thus, civil society and the development sector should concentrate their efforts on enabling environments that promote the selection of good political leadership at all administrative levels, by providing the public with specific, reliable and impartial information on the performance of leaders (Devarajan and Khemani 2016). This 'technical' fix is clearly not enough, however, given that politics is, by definition, political. Ideological and power-related dimensions cannot be so easily factored-out. There are many other reasons to explain why bad politicians frequently lead governments, and why good leaders with ethical, democratic and progressive credentials are kept out of office.

In most of the world, however, states are failing to play this moderator role, or rather, are doing the opposite. Conference participants discussed increasing controls on mainstream and social media, and a reduction in the space available for civil society space for agency in the name of security and internal stability (Sherwood 2015). Elsewhere, governments have adopted control tactics in digital spaces such as legal pushback, and attempts to complicate navigation of social media sites by 'flooding the space with supporters and sometimes paid "trolls"' (Tufekci 2014: 6). Internet shutdowns during moments of political tension have become commonplace in recent years (Kihara and Njeri 2016): in the first eight months of 2016 alone the advocacy organisation Access Now documented 20 incidences of governments ordering companies to cut off access to communications tools – like Twitter, SMS or Facebook (Access Now 2016). But we have also seen a rise in challenges to these threats, with people using virtual private networks (VPNs) to continue to organise and exchange information over social networks during these shutdowns (Olukotun and Kenyanito 2016).

### **3 Citizen voice and claims in digital spaces**

The growing divide between political institutions and political change and the diffusion of digital technologies has given rise to new kinds of networked social movements (Castells 2015) that provide new means for the articulation of 'citizen voice', mostly outside the frameworks of what we historically understand as 'civil society'. These informal networks often refuse to engage in the ways officially recognised as political and civil, resorting instead to 'unruly politics' (Khanna *et al.* 2013) that attract mass support. Citizen voice and claims are manifested both through formal means such as pressure group membership and activism, and through informal means of participation such as the 'promotion, investigation, discussion, and curation of political material' online, which could in itself be seen as an informal means of activism (Koc-Michalska, Lilleker and Vedel 2016).

Mass movements coordinated by social media which have emerged in recent years are a 'general phenomenon that ranges from global political movements to neighbourhood campaigns' (Margetts *et al.* 2015). These new species of social movement have emerged thanks to digital tools described by Manuel Castells as 'the fastest and most

autonomous, interactive, reprogrammable and self-expanding means of communication in history' (Castells 2015). These movements gather momentum rapidly, yet, as in the case of Egypt, many have proved to be unstable and difficult to sustain. An interview with Wael Ghonim, the Google executive in Cairo who helped launch the Egyptian revolution, described recently how the promise of the power of networked social movements had not delivered: 'Five years ago I thought the Internet was a power that was granted to the people and that would never be weakened. But I was wrong' (Tufekci and Talbot 2016). These movements lack the organisational capacity, formalised or not, of older movements which impacts their effectiveness after the initial phases of protest (Tufekci 2014).

The affordances and design of social networking platforms play an important role in shaping new forms of citizen engagement and political mobilisation. On these platforms filter bubbles (Pariser 2011) control the content that users are exposed to online, and can render political opinions which contradict your own, invisible on social media. Writing on digital citizenship, Isin and Ruppert discuss what they describe as the 'soft' control of digital spaces in which 'the performative force of filters involves directing the knowledge of citizen subjects and closes off and encloses their worlds' (Isin and Ruppert 2015). In the wake of the June 2016 Brexit vote, in which the UK voted to leave the European Union, civic technology expert Tom Steinberg reflected on the political implications of the filter bubble, which prevented him from being exposed to opposing views during the campaign, and suggested that the issue has now taken on greater urgency in the current political moment (Steinberg 2016). Looking at the role of social media in movement-building, Geert Lovink described how earlier gains by networked social movements were being undermined by the affordances of social media which limit the agency of users: '[E]verything you say is rendered an "update" or "status." All we can do in the current social media architectures is transmit news' (Lovink and Meyer 2016).

New research approaches which use data science methods are also needed to help us understand political activity in digital spaces, as they can analyse the large-scale transactional data produced by platforms such as Twitter. For example, whilst opinion polls failed to predict the recent Brexit victory, an analysis of the 'leave' campaign across social media platforms showed that the number of tweets containing the term 'leave' was nearly double the number containing 'remain' between February and June 2016 (Siegel and Tucker 2016).

Digital spaces – or the 'networked public sphere' (Benkler *et al.* 2015) – are also used by extremist groups with quite different aims. A new kind of 'unruly politics' sees networked technologies used by far-right and anti-Muslim groups, to support their mobilisation efforts. For example, in Germany the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident (PEGIDA) were rapidly mobilised between 2014 and 2015 (Peschlová 2015), achieving more than 200,000 likes on their Facebook page (Puschmann *et al.* 2016). However, the same tools that PEGIDA

used to mobilise also proved instrumental in its undoing, when its leader was forced to resign because of details from a leaked private Facebook conversation.

The rapid evolution of these dynamic and diverse forms of digitally mediated political activity highlight the shortcomings in both our current models of governance and the theoretical frames we use to understand civic engagement. Political institutions struggle in the face of 'emotional bursts and populist movements that unfold on the Internet' (Polonski 2016). Recent work by Koc-Michalska *et al.* on civic engagement in the digital age argues for an abandonment of the conceptual barrier between traditional and non-traditional forms of engagement. So while political institutions using digital platforms 'follow the political logic of traditional campaigning' (Koc-Michalska *et al.* 2016: 1807) informal forms of participation by citizens such as accessing news on Facebook can lead to new forms of participation, engagement and political impact.

#### 4 Future agendas for analysis and action

These new modes of engagement sparked debate at the conference, where participants expressed a need for new mediating structures and 'Habermasian' (Habermas 1991) spaces for dialogue in light of the Brexit vote. Given the threats to the role of civil society discussed above it is necessary to understand the spaces, institutions and frameworks in which citizen voice can effectively be heard. Might these enabling environments be found in the cities? Sheela Patel of the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC), India spoke at a conference session on 'Radical Social, Political and Theoretical Innovation from Cities of the "South"', about successes in organising at local level with women's collectives and slum dwellers, which then scaled up to national and global impact. Finally, this might be a time for an evolution in our theoretical frameworks to understand the new forms of 'unruly politics' and social movements we have seen in recent years and the 'openings and closings' that digital spaces offer for political engagement and alliances (Isin and Ruppert 2015).

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