

# **Civil Society: The Linchpin of Democracy**

**By Anne McDonagh**

**Civil society is not an organization to enforce good manners! Civil Society is an umbrella term being used increasingly to describe a wide variety of organizations whose only common element is that they are from neither the government sector nor the private sector.**

**Sometimes called the 'third sector,' civil society includes professional associations, religious organizations, social service agencies, schools, advocacy groups, citizen groups and social movements. It is the local Girl Guide troop or soccer club; it is the Rotary Club and the community centre; it is the United Way and the Fraser Institute. It includes international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Red Cross, UNICEF, Oxfam etc. This third sector is the linchpin of society and crucial to the long-term success of new democracies such as Ukraine.**

**Civil society is made up of people who work in or contribute in some way to this third sector of society. Often they work against the 'status quo;' for example, members of the Council of Canadians defend Canada's social programs and our natural resources, promote economic and social justice and suggest alternatives to corporate globalization.**

**At the other end of the spectrum, organizations like the C.D. Howe Institute and the Fraser Institute urge governments to cut taxes, lobby for a more market-oriented economy and advocate for less government and more privatization.**

**There are innumerable organizations, which work for one particular cause such as the Canadian Hearing Society, CNIB (The Canadian National Institute for the Blind) or ITAC (Information Technology Association of Canada). Then there are service organizations like the Rotary Club, religious associations like the Knights of Columbus and organizations of people interested in the same hobby. And on it goes. They all make up civil society.**

**Jeremy Rifkin, renowned author and professor at Wharton Business School, writes 'society [is] a three-legged stool made up of the market sector, government sector, and civil sector. The first leg**

**creates market capital, the second leg creates public capital, and the third leg creates social capital. Of the three legs, the oldest and most important, but least acknowledged, is the Third Sector.'**

**Without the 'third sector,' societies around the world, including our own, would collapse. According to a report published by the North-South Institute in 1999, there were about 300 Canadian NGOs working on international development issues. These organizations work in 79 developing countries. Annually, they raise about \$412 million from the public and another \$209 million from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). After the Tsunami, it was the NGOs who picked up the pieces.**

**Canada's domestic volunteer sector, a large component of civil society, each year delivers services worth more than \$3,000 per person, again according to the North-South Institute. 'More than 1.1 billion hours are donated annually to Canada's 75,000 charities alone and about \$90 billion passes through their coffers in the form of government grants and individual and corporate donations. More important, half of all Canadians participate in some kind of civil society organization,' in both paid and unpaid work, says the report. There are more people employed in the third sector than in the construction, electronics or the textile and apparel industries.**

**A vibrant civil society is essential to democratic institutions and social justice. Civil society holds both government and business to account. A society completely controlled by government or by corporations or by both working hand in hand—the American military-industrial complex comes to mind—has great difficulty developing effective democratic institutions.**

**Democracy in the former Soviet Union has not taken hold easily because the former totalitarian government of the Soviet Union 'atomized,' its citizens, that is, it alienated them from one another and turned each into a potential betrayer. Such a suspicion-ridden environment makes civil society impossible. Experts now say that democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq will be difficult to establish because there are very few civil society institutions.**

**Interest in civil society and recognition of its importance is growing around the world because civil society offers a vision of the**

**significance of human existence and human endeavour different from the bureaucracy of government and the bottom line of business. Civil society is a salutary counterpoint to the unlimited greed of the current corporate world; it creates inclusiveness and community; and it can mend the so-called democratic deficit by in fact enabling each of us to make a difference.**

**Most of us are dissatisfied with the road our society has taken where everything is for sale; where the bottom line of profit is the only concern of business even if it means sending jobs half way around the world; and where individual success is measured by how much money you earn and the make of your car.**

**Advertising, the servant of the marketplace, clutters the land-and-cityscapes; it invades our television and computer screens. Cynically, it sells counterfeit dreams of romance and success along with the cars and shampoos it is ostensibly selling. Furthermore, by creating needs and by seeking an ever-expanding economy, corporate capitalism is depleting our resources and destroying the environment. As the poet Wordsworth said, 'Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.'**

**Despite unlimited goods, many of us find ourselves as disillusioned by capitalism as eastern Europeans were by communism. Governments think cutting taxes and deficits is their primary task rather than leading and inspiring us to deal with important issues like saving the environment or providing services to look after the most vulnerable. An effective civil society can push governments to act to create a different world than the one we have today.**

**A strong civil society is an alternative to government and the market place—or at least a balance to those two powerful forces. In fact, it is necessary for a healthy economy because it creates social trust.**

**Social trust in turn generates a feeling of genuine inclusiveness in society by involving us in something bigger than ourselves and our immediate family. If you join an organization whose goals you believe in, whether it is to change a political system, advocate for social justice, campaign for the rights of non-smokers—incidentally, an extraordinarily successful campaign of the last 20 years—you become**

**part of civil society. You feel that you can make a difference—and in reality you can—because there is strength in numbers, and you have joined with others who share your point of view.**

**Taking part in civil society makes us feel and act like citizens. We stop living in isolation from one another; we stop being just consumers, workers or taxpayers. We meet others on common ground and act together to achieve our goals, and in that process we create a community we have some connection with and can contribute to. More than that, it is civil society that develops a collective awareness and mobilizes public opinion, which then puts pressure on government to make changes. It is, in fact, one of the few ways society can change peacefully.**

**The cynicism about politics in Canada and poor voter turn-out suggests that our civil society is weakening. These behaviours indicate that we need a stronger, more responsive relationship between government and citizens. One way to contribute to strengthening that relationship is to become involved in grass roots party politics, also part of civil society.**

**Add to our ‘democratic deficit,’ increasing concern about our poisoned environment, the depletion of natural resources, the disappearance of species, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, not only between the developed nations and the rest of the world but also between the privileged few in our own society and the rest of us. If ever we needed a strong civil society, it is now. Moreover, it must include a global civil society because so many of the problems we face today are global. The Internet has provided the means to develop a global civil society and that is exactly what is happening.**

**To find out more about civil society, have a look at these websites. Better yet become a part of civil society by joining an organization you believe in. As the old adage says, ‘United we stand, divided we fall.’**

**Philosophy and Civil Society:  
Centre for Civil Society  
Civil Society International  
Civil Society and the UN**

**[www.civsoc.com](http://www.civsoc.com)  
[www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS)  
[www.civilsoc.org](http://www.civilsoc.org)  
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