

Global civil societies

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



There has been a great deal of expansion and formation of new civil societies around the globe. This has particularly come about due to the process of globalization and the expansion of democratic governance, telecommunications and economic integration, in addition, as well as the threat to security. The term is seen as a progressive process particularly because many claim that global civil society is committed to the values of human rights, gender equality, social justice and democracy.

On the whole global civil societies are those organizations that operate in the international realm that share the purpose of correcting the world social order, bringing about harmony and dealing with issues that affect human freedom and human equality, in other words these global civil societies are concerned about creating a better world through advocating a fairer, freer and a more just global order. Just to name a few, organizations such as the World Trade Organization, Amnesty International, Greenpeace and Human Rights Watch.

Thus the following essay shall critically review the different definitions of Global Civil Societies and look at what are global civil societies are and its purpose as well as share light on criticisms of global civil societies. Although the idea of global civil society fits well with the notion of creating a just global world, there are definitions that are highly contested and argued against. In order for us to understand the concept of global civil societies, one needs to understand the term civil societies.

Therefore the following paragraph shall put light on the meaning and nature of civil society. Civil society is seen as a social sphere independent of the state and the market (Thorn and Moksnes. 2012: 5). It is understood as the <https://assignbuster.com/global-civil-societies/>

collection of non-state, non-profit, voluntary organization formed by people within a state. These organizations seek to influence the policy of government and international organizations and to complement government services. Traditionally civil society includes networks, associations, groups, movements that occupy the social space between the family and the state.

Yet there have been various changes to the definition of civil society, which will later be seen as a challenge to the term global civil society. Mary Kaldor, in her article *The idea of Global Civil Society*, elaborates on the concept of civil society and how it becomes global civil society. She explains, civil society is a modern concept, which can be traced back to Aristotle and other modern thinkers, who came to believe that there was no distinction between civil society and the state (Kaldor. 2003: 584). Thus civil society at this time was seen as a type of state that was characterised by a social contract (Kaldor. 2003: 584). However in the nineteenth century the concept of civil society took on a whole new meaning, it was now seen as dependent of the state. It now becomes to be seen as the intermediate realm between the family and the state (Kaldor. 2003: 584). For Hegel, civil society was the ‘achievement of the modern world-the territory of mediation where there is a free play for every idiosyncrasy, every talent, every accident of birth and fortune and where waves of passion gust forth, regulated only by reason glinting through them’ (John. 1999: 3), thus to Hegel, civil societies included the economy and its history (Hegel. 1996). Yet in the early twentieth century, civil society adopted a new definition, it came to be understood as the realm not just between the state and the family, yet the realm between culture, ideology, political debate, the state and the family (Kaldor.

2003: 585). One aspect that is associated with the concept of civil society is the relationship it shares with socialism and democracy, in other words it recognizes the sociological underpinnings of modern democracy (Khilnami. 001: 16). Thus, one can understand that civil societies were about a rule-governed society based on the consent of individuals. Overall, civil society is a process through which individuals can negotiate, argue, fight against or agree with each other on political and economical issues, and these can all be done through voluntary associations, movements, parties, unions and the individual. Issues such as political rights, the economy, human rights, and labour rights are the things civil society contests with the government (Anheier et al. 001: 4). As stated before they reach boundaries that the government cannot. This leads to the question, what is global civil society, in retrospect; it is civil societies within the global sphere which deals with global issues. However, how global is civil society? What is 'global civil society'? Many supporters of global civil society have stressed the latter, asserting that global civil society is a progressive concept, in other words, one that advances the values of social justice and human rights.

For example, Mary Kaldor (2003), states that global civil society is also about the " meaning of human equality in an increasingly unjust world". Global civil society can be defined as encompassing all associations, excluding governments, the private sectors and families that act transnationally, thus it is about understanding globalization from small levels such as from the ordinary people. In addition global civil society refers to the huge collection of groups that operate across borders and beyond the reach of governments (Anheier et al. 001: 3). A simple definition of the concept is as follows, it is a

vast, interconnected and multi-layered non-governmental space that comprises many hundreds of thousands of self-directing institutions and ways of life that generate global effects, the ideal type of global civil society, which will be discussed later, brings in the idea that we can strengthen our collective powers of guiding and transforming world order (Storrar et al. 2011). Furthermore, global civil society refers to civil society groups that operate within the global spectrum.

It can be linked to the process of globalisation which has allowed the globalization of communication and information and a global market, where you find citizens in one country support citizens in another. Therefore, the term, global civil society refers to non-governmental structures and activities that consist of individuals, households, profit seeking business, non-profit governmental organisations, coalitions, social movements and cultural communities that work towards a common objective (Keane. 2003: 7).

It also comprises of public personalities, such as Gandhi and Bill Gates, as well as bodies such as Amnesty International and the International Red Cross (Keane. 2003: 7). All these associations and organizations despite geographical distance, and barriers of time, have deliberately organised themselves and conducted cross boarder social activities, business and politics outside the boundaries of governmental structures in the hope to create a just global order. John Keane argues that global civil societies is taking shape but that its character and implications for the older state system remain unclear (Keane. 003: 7), as many associate 'civil society' as being part of the state, yet the concept of the global civil society is that it is independent of the state and that it functions on its own, such as non-

governmental organisation and international organizations. This is a contested argument. Consequently, Global civil society adopted a similar concept as civil society, however it is seen as a response to rising concerns for the need of a new social, economic and political deal at the global level.

Thus it functions at a global level and looks at issues that affect the whole world. One of the definitions of global civil society is it being an ideal-type, John Keane speaks of the ideal-type of global civil society, according to him, it is referred to as a dynamic non-governmental system of international socio-economical institutions that straddle the whole earth, and that has complex effects that are felt in its four corners. It is neither a static object nor a fait accompli (Keane. 003: 8). He further states that global civil society is “ an unfinished project that consists of sometimes thick, and other times thinly stretched networks---socio-economic institutions and actors who organise themselves across borders, with the deliberate aim of drawing the world together” (Keane, 2003: 8). Therefore it is seen as its own form of society, which uses its own powers, influences, without the use of neither violent, nor the help from the state and government to bring about change.

On the other hand, many question whether global civil society is democratic. Global civil society in many senses can be said to be democratic as it claims to be independent of the nation states and is not influenced by the government. Hakan Thorn and Heidi Moksnes argue that global civil society can be linked to global democratisation, particularly because it represents a response to the democratic deficit, which is seen as one of the most problematic aspects of the globalization process (Thorn and Moksnes. 012: 4). Thus global civil society, as a process of self-organisation of transnational

social spheres is seen as a potential carrier of democratic learning processes, as it has the ability to widen the meaning and practice of democracy across nations, allowing for public debate, as well as advocate for human rights, through its cooperation with civil societies and its relation with states and other influential organizations such as transnational corporations.

It was mentioned earlier that global civil society is considered progressive, for example in the case of its campaign against Landmines and the Jubilee 2000 campaign for debt relief are two of their successful campaigns (Wild. 2006: 2). They have also, according to Wild, have succeeded in putting forward new issues and ideas onto the international agenda, changing national and international policies and have helped improve the transparency and accountability of global institutions, as well as mobilized public awareness and political engagement (Wild. 2006: 2).

On the other hand, it is argued that global civil society is not inherently progressive, it is rather seen as being heterogeneous, as you will find that it comprises of groups that are illiberal, anti-democratic, violent as well as liberal, democratic and peaceful. In other words, let's look at what exactly are global civil societies made of, Thorn and Moksnes state that, global civil society are comprised of civil society actors whom engage across the world within the global arena, in sharing experiences and formulating global norms (Thorn and Moksnes. 2012: 4).

Thus if Greenpeace is part of global civil societies, surely Al Qaeda is too. Therefore, global civil society as being democratic is highly contested. Furthermore it is difficult to understand the concept of global civil society as being independent of the government, because questions of funding, legal

assistance, protection from threats arise, as the state and government are seen by many as the only body that is capable of organizing effective legitimate power. In addition as we look at previous definitions of "civil society", it was once defined as having relations with the state.

Further on, one may question how can non-governmental organizations poses political influences if it has no ties whatsoever with the neither state nor government. Secondly how can one be sure what is the correct definition of global civil society as the term civil society has in the past adopted several definitions? Corry (2006) writes of the critics of "global civil societies", where he shares light on three main criticism of the meanings and definitions of global civil society.

According to him, these criticism have awakened particularly because, the term global civil society over the years has been seen as hopelessly vague, others doubt its ability to effectively challenge the strong hold the state has, and lastly many question its ability in being a actor on the world stage because of the supposed anti-democratic nature of global civil society. The first criticism claims that it is ambiguous, its definitions is weak and holds no theoretical explanation (Corry. 2006: 305).

The problem with the term is that there have been so many contested definitions as to what civil society is that it is criticised for exactly what does civil society really mean in this contemporary and modern world. It becomes a problem because now which definition is relevant and most functional. A second criticism is the problem of statist bias, it is argued that global civil society is no product of that state, yet many beg to differ; particularly

because of the term “civil society” which in the past was in relation with the state (Corry. 2006: 306).

They accuse global civil society of suggesting a hidden comparison between global and domestic spheres (Corry. 2006: 307). Clearly this is seen as contradictory because there are no similarities at global and domestic level. Therefore, one may understand this contradiction as the global civil society not sure itself as whether it wants to be a product of the state or not. Because domestic spheres is highly organized by the state, and you cannot have such domestic issues brought into the global spheres which global civil societies assume it can.

A third criticism is that global civil society is undemocratic, its legitimacy is questioned and highly condemned that it undermines democracy by sapping further the authority of the nation-state, as it is seen as the only democratic institution (Corry. 2006: 308). Corry quotes from John Fonte, whom states that global civil society, which are transnational agencies and non-governmental organizations “deny or override the national sovereignty of democratic states against surprisingly muted or incoherent opposition” (Fonte. 004), what he means by this is that global civil society bring about new political and democratic challenges to the sovereignty of the state, and undermines the state’s democratic ability. Thus it is more of a problem of what exactly is “global” and “civil society” as they both can be distinguished as processes on their own. One needs to look at the “global” in the term global civil society. The term global separates itself from the state, as it refers to the international arena rather than the domestic arena which is bound by the state.

Although, Corry states that the Global may be regarded as a post-statist rather than non-statist term, particularly because the term derived from the concept and structure of the state, he sees it as a continuation of the state rather than a separated sphere. One may argue that the Global is a form of state, yet just within the international arena as it sought to function as a state. Although Keane argues that, civil societies become global once they cross state boundaries (Keane. 2003: 17).

Overall, the term can be said to be contradictory, particularly because of the changing definitions and meanings of the concept of civil society, as it has made the term global civil society a contested one. Global civil society is understood as the collection of civil societies within the international realm, these are non-governmental structures and activities that consist of individuals, actors, non-governmental organisations, international organizations, profit seeking business, non-profit governmental organisations, social movements and cultural communities that work towards a just global order.

These are institutions and organisations that function across borders beyond the reach of government. One of definitions that global civil society tries to pursue is that it is not a product of the nation-state and that is independent of the state, this here is one of the highly contested definitions of global civil society, particularly because it sought to function as a state at the global level. From the above, we saw three criticisms towards the term, which all contested its definition and its contradiction to being independent of the state and its perceived anti-democratic nature.

The term contradicts itself merely because, it claims to be a process on its own that is not affiliated with the state, yet it functions towards human rights, gender equality, democracy and global justice, these are all seen as attributes of a democratic institutions. One may argue that the state is the only institution that can hold legitimate democracy. One of the contending arguments is that global civil society is anti-democratic, as you find it comprising of various groups and organizations that do not advocate for democracy. Yet the term is still and evolving concept as we see the increase of globalization.