

# [The concept of civil society politics essay](https://assignbuster.com/the-concept-of-civil-society-politics-essay/)

It is important to identify the role of civil society in governance because there is actually a controversy about its role in relationship with the state. For example, Tocqueville (1969) argues that civil society is the most credible alternative to the state for the delivery of public goods. On the other hand, Hegel considers its role as being complimentary to that of the state and he puts a premium on the role of the state. Political Scientists such as Stephan (1998), Stocpol (1992) and Keane (1998) agree that civil society organisations are pre-requisite for making good governance. The World Bank and the United Nations also share the view that there can be no good governance without civil society.

The term civil society is itself a subject of many debates. In order to identify the role of civil society in governance, It will be necessary to clarify the context in which the term is been discussed in this paper. Even the notion of good governance is contestable and as such will also require some clarifications. Doornbos (2003: 4) agrees that there has “ hardly been a consensus about its core meaning”.

In this essay therefore, attempts will be made, using available literature to define the terms civil society and good governance, explain the inter-face between the two concepts, identify the roles of civil society in governance, give a brief description of our case study, which in this instance is South Africa, analyse the impact of civil societies in relationship with good governance in South Africa and conclude on the basis of my findings.

## The Concept of Civil Society.

Civil society is pluralistic in meaning. Perhaps the most profound and enduring definition of the term is that of Locke(1963), who describes civil society as a contract between equals founded on the basis of voluntarism. Tocqueville (op. cit.) builds on the definition provided by Locke and extends the concept further by introducing the idea of collective action as a way of curbing state tyranny for the purpose of producing the common good. Thus, the notion of civil society as a model of self-governance through voluntary effort for the delivery of common good was first introduced. Also, the ideas of voluntarism and collective action projected by these authors form the basis of democracy which is crucial for civil society. Friedman and Mckaiser argue that civil society and democracy are interdependent. According to them, democracy is the vehicle through which civil society can acquire a voice to speak for the people.

More recently, Edwards(2005) while exploring the ideas of some modern philosophers who project the idea of civil society as the public sphere (Habermas 1989) and the good society( Kant 1970), concludes that the idea of civil society remains compelling because it brings out the best in us and establishes lasting solutions for issues of inequalities, social injustice and poverty. Cohen and Arato (1992) distinguish civil society from the state and market and argue that it could become the needed instrument for expanding civil rights and democracy. This interpretation of the concept emphasises the idea of democracy which is also considered a necessary condition for good governance.

There are many other interpretations of this term by different theorists, but for the purpose of this discourse, civil society will encompass all collective actions by voluntary organisations within the public sphere for the purpose of delivering the common good. It will include activities of Non- Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Social movements, informal and formal communal groups which collaborate with other institutional pillars to deliver goods of public value.

## The Concept of Good Governance.

Governance as a word connotes control, regulations and order. Court, Hyden and Mease (2004: 16) describe governance as a system of regulations and rules within which social actors must take decisions for the purpose of creating social order. Swilling (1997) agrees that governance is the relationship between power structures to create “ a civic public realm”

However, the idea that good governance is dependent on civil society makes the concept complex and pluralistic in meaning too. According to Warren (1999), liberal democrats will define a government as “ good” only if it has the following attributes; freedom of information and freedom of the press, citizens capacity building strategy, upholds the fundamental human rights of citizens, encourages collective action and decision making, provides avenue for public opinion and institutional checks and balances.

Evans (2012) advances another idea of good governance premised on integrity in public administration. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Transparency International (TI) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are some of the advocates of integrity as new public management strategy for the purpose of achieving accountable, transparent and responsible public institutions (ibid). In this model, the OECD identifies eight different criteria for good governance, which it calls “ ethics infrastructure”. They are;

“ political commitment to integrity, effective legal frame work, efficient accountability mechanisms, workable codes of conduct, professional socialisation of staff, supportive public service conditions, an ethics coordinating body; and an active society performing a watchdog role”.

In this arrangement therefore, civil societies are assumed to be integrity agents and they are expected to monitor the activities of public institutions to ensure accountability, transparency, competence and responsiveness in public administration (ibid).

Grindle (2004), while criticizing modern day advocates of good governance agenda for not putting in place a priority list, advances the idea of ‘ good enough governance’ , which to him is more realistic. This model embodies important issues relating to culture, context and priority national developmental goals.

It is evident from the discourse above that good governance means different things in different context, but it has certain common attributes such as poverty reduction (Stapenhurst & Pelizzo, 2002), accountability, transparency, minimum level of corruption, competent and efficient public service (op. cit.). These attributes will inform the parameter for determining the roles of civil society in good governance in this research.

## The Inter-face between Civil Society and Good Governance.

It is also obvious from the discourse above, that the notions of civil society and good governance are closely linked. The two concepts share many distinct positive attributes necessary for achieving poverty reduction, sustainable development and economic stability and they are perceived as proffering solutions to most of the world’s problems, irrespective of whether they are local, regional or global(Roy 2008). However, Pelizzo (2011) contends that civil societies can become catalysts for the entrenchment of good governance only and when they make a demand on the political class to check and improve on the quality of governance. Uphoff (1986) also argues that civil socities are able to achieve greater level of development when they are independent from bureaucratic controls.

## The Roles of Civil Society in Governance.

Civil societies play very important roles in governance. In the first instance, as advocates of the good society, they help to promote democratic principles and defend democratically elected governments. Secondly, they act as watchdogs to ensure prudent and efficient use of national resources. Lastly, they help to create public awareness on issues relating to good governance and develop a well- informed society. Dewey (1916) argues that the symbol of a good democracy is its ability to develop a well- informed society. Civil societies must be financially, politically and legally independent from government in order for them to effectively fulfil these roles. To succeed, they will also require the support of the political class, other arms of government and institutional pillars such as; anti -corruption bodies, directors of public prosecution, human rights bodies (TI Sourcebook, 2000).

## South Africa – A Brief Description.

South Africa as nation was for several years traumatized because of the struggle to overthrow the apartheid regime. However, in 1994, Nelson Mandela became the first president of post -apartheid South Africa, a National Unity Government was established comprising of the country’s majority party; the African National Congress (ANC), the National Party and the Freedom Party. The government’s major challenge was to rebuild the nation which had become politically, socially and economically devastated by so many years of conflict under the apartheid regime. The government immediately set up a Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), to address the issues of social inequalities, social injustice, infrastructural deficit, extreme poverty, massive unemployment deep seated insecurity and myriads of other socio- economic consequences of the years of the oppressive rule.

Under the RDP, the government designed a well -coordinated and sustainable programme to be executed with the cooperation of the different arms of government, together with civil society organisations and the private sector. The objective was to rebuild the nation within a peaceful and stable environment, characterised by sustainable development and economic growth. The political climate in South Africa changed significantly; the country attempted to embrace some of the neo- liberal economic policies of the West to come up with its own unique system which Andreason (2006) refers to as ‘ predatory liberalism’. In this model, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) adopted a strategy that enabled it to consolidate economic power in itself and effectively ward off opposition.

It is pertinent to state that there is a belief in some quarters that the anti – apartheid struggle was inspired by civil society organisations. This notion cannot be correct in view of the earlier claim that democracy and civil society are intimate bedfellows. The struggle that brought about the fall of apartheid in South Africa can best be described as resistance against racial oligarchy.

## Civil Society Organisations and Their Impact on Good Governance in South Africa

The post- apartheid government between 1994 and early 2000, attempted to run an open system which enabled civil society organizations to participate in decision making. Friedman and Kihato (2004) assert that the government created a formal avenue for all citizens to participate in policy making, their criticism however was that organizations were not given equal opportunities for participation.

It appeared that government concern was to remain in control. Friedman and Kihato observe that the government seemingly acceptance of civil society was a façade to silence them by integrating them into formal state structure like the National Economic Development Council. Fioramonti (2005) reports that though there were many civil society organizations covering a wide range of developmental objectives; their impact could not be felt because government had withdrawn much of its financial support and many of their leaders had taken up political appointments. This emphasises the importance of political and financial autonomy from the state if civil society organizations are to effectively play their roles.

The post- apartheid government of the ANC failed to deliver on its national economic plan of 1996 and there was little or no demand by the civil society organizations on government to give an account of its stewardship. Habib and Kotze observe that the government adopted a centralist approach and other developmental partners were completely alienated from the policy decision making process.

As the economic crises deepened in South Africa, the ruling party abdicated from providing goods of public value to the citizenry, some interest groups attempted to fill the vacuum left by government. They established crises committees in rural areas to challenge some of the state policies which they considered oppressive and designed to further pauperize the citizenry. The relationship between the government and the civil society organizations became more tensed. Fioramonti (op. cit.) reports that in 1997, Nelson Mandela criticized civil society organizations for not been democratically accountable and also accused them of being agents “ in the service of foreign donors” Huxtable, Smith and Villalon (2005) further report that former President Mbeki in the bid to discredit foreign- based NGOs severally accused them of not being accountable and wanting to control home- based civil society organizations. Fioramonti (op. cit.) concludes that the division that developed within the civil society organisations in South Africa coupled with fierce state opposition made it difficult for them to engage with government on issues of national development.

Post- apartheid South Africa has undergone a period of progressive political stability between 1994 and 2007 which led to the establishment of structures for the consolidation of its fledgling democracy. The civil society organisations have also grown in number and influence. Thomas(2004) adduces that the increasing independence of these organisations from the apron of the state together with the influence of neo- liberal economies have helped to build a strong democratic structure for the state.

Since the inception of the Jacob Zuma’s administration in 2009, civil society organisations have made a lot of impact at national, provincial and local government levels. For example, a coalition of civil society organisations namely; the AIDS Consortium, the AIDS Law Project, the National Association of People Living with Aids and Treatment Action Campaign influenced a change in government’s policy on HIV and AIDS (Johnson 2006).

Friedman and Mckaiser note that focussed civil society organisations with predominant black membership have not allowed racial sentiments prevent them from challenging government on any policy which is not deemed to be in the interest of the masses, in spite of the overwhelming black support for the current administration. This non- racial posture of some of these organisations have ensured a more responsive democracy and by implication good governance, in that the interest of the society takes precedence over every other consideration.

However, civil society organisations in South Africa have been criticised for not representing the poor adequately. The vulnerable groups such as the unemployed, workers in the informal sector and casual workers have no avenue for informed representation in governance. The lack of adequate representation of this group in policy decision making has made it difficult for government to effectively address the issue of poverty reduction. There is glaring evidence that government has not been able to align itself with the aspiration of the poor. For example, Friedman and Mckaiser allege that the Centre for Policy Studies reported that in the early 1990s, government devoted a lot of energy to formulate policies that will extend housing mortgage to the poor in spite of clear evidence that the poor were not interested in mortgage facilities.

The lack of identity with the grassroots has some negative implications for the civil society organisations. First, the gap has prevented them from building a relationship of trust amongst the ordinary people, to enable the civil society organisations garner support to challenge government’s policies which are deemed to be anti – people. Friedman and Mckaiser argue that there is a belief amongst South African grassroots that civil society organisations are elitists and many are sceptical about their motives for organizing pro- poor campaign. Secondly, the void in relationship has prevented them from building a well -informed society which can engage government on issues of national developments. For example, it is reported that many poor communities in South Africa erroneously belief that private companies and not government provide potable water and as such are responsible for their inability to access water.

On the other hand, some evidence exists to show that civil society organisations actually identify with the plight of the poor. For example, between 1990 and 2009, civil society organisations like COSATU and its allies made some efforts to address the issue of poverty reduction through Basic Income Grant Campaign (Friedman and Mckaiser). The problem however appears to be that their inability to embed themselves amongst the grassroots, have prevented them from fully appreciating the struggles of the poor and from effectively representing the poor.

Another handicap to some civil society organisations’ role in good governance in South Africa is in the area of political affiliation to the ruling party. For example, COSATU which is deemed to be the largest civil society organisation in South Africa is an ally of the ANC. COSATU is seen as been reluctant to form a coalition with other civil society organisations on issues which might appear to be critical of the ruling ANC government, even when they are in the best interest of the masses. It is alleged that COSATU tend to highlight the government’s achievements, while keeping mute in the areas of its failures (Friedman and Mckaiser). Again this point underscores the importance of political autonomy by civil society organisations if they are to play their roles as watchdogs effectively.

Civil society organisations in South Africa have recorded some degree of success in the area of influencing government’s policy on women liberation. Tripp (2001) argues that political changes in the early 1990s coupled with campaigns by civil society organisation transformed the face of women’s activism in Africa. According to her, the development opened the door for women to be engaged in civic education, leadership training and run for political office. The most outstanding example in South Africa is Winnie Mandela, former wife of ex- president Nelson Mandela who contested for office under the ANC in year 2009.

## Conclusion

Flowing from the above, civil society organizations have had a positive impact in ensuring good governance in some aspects in South Africa, but in others, they have not done so well. Several reasons are responsible for their limited impact. First, their inabilities to disentangle themselves politically and financially from the ruling ANC party have led to some compromise. For example, COSATU has failed to engage the ANC government on issues that would project it as being disloyal to its close ally (the ANC), even when those issues might be in the interest of the society at large. Second, their inabilities to deepen their roots amongst the poor and effectively represent the grassroots in national debates constitute an obstacle. Third, their disposition to devote much of their energy / resources only to pursue individual concerns / interests, while neglecting to uphold civil liberties, democratic principles and structures poses a threat to their very survival.

If civil society organisations are to effectively play their roles in securing good governance in South Africa, they need to severe close ties with the ruling party, source for foreign donor institutions for financial support and re -strategize domestically to have a strong home support to be able to uphold democratic principles, defend the rights of the people and make government accountable to the people.