

CIVIL SOCIETY

Field Statement of Current Programming (October 2003)

Background

Throughout history, public deliberation and the associational life of citizens have been central to the realization of peace and social justice. Although the term 'civil society' gained prominence after the overthrow of Communism in Eastern Europe, people have always come together voluntarily to articulate and advance the interests they hold in common. This is the meaning of civil society as we understand it – a practical vehicle to express the visions that we hold in our hearts, a 'place where people matter' more than profit or the pursuit of the power of the State, and an arena for the exercise of 'active citizenship.' 'Active citizenship' means the creative power of human agency expressed through collective action, not just a bundle of rights and responsibilities bestowed by a State. In this sense, the institutions of civil society enable citizens to share in charting the future of their societies, beyond the act of voting.

We believe that commitments to citizenship are best developed through concrete action. Therefore, the Ford Foundation's Civil Society program concentrates on strengthening the organizations, networks and movements through which people activate their citizenship in settings where power relations are exposed, contested and remade. At their best, civic groups are a bulwark against the abuse of public or private power, a practical vehicle for the transformation of social values and behavior, and a space where alternative solutions to social problems can be developed and debated. During long authoritarian winters and in other repressive contexts, support to citizens groups can build leadership, foster participation, nurture critical thinking, and promote a sense of solidarity that helps to keep alive those values and practices that are crucial for a more democratic future.

All parts of the Ford Foundation work to nurture groups in civil society – as an instrument to strengthen cultural identity and education, build up assets and social capital, and promote human rights. Civil societies are also a key to effective governance and a healthy democratic life. However, the goal of the civil society field is broader than all of these objectives: whereas others work through civil society to pursue their goals, we work on civil society to encourage associational life as a whole, the practice of active citizenship, and a democratic and inclusive public sphere. We do so because we believe these things provide the wellspring of values and motivations that make social energy a force for transformation in economics, politics, and public life.

In reality, however, civil societies are often weak, fragmented and internally undemocratic – shot through by power relations of different kinds, home to differing norms and values, and challenged in their ability to fulfill the roles described above. Visions of associational life vary greatly across culture and context, and are constantly in flux – hence the use of civil societies in the plural throughout this field statement. Political conditions in many societies militate against citizen organizing or the

development of a culture of citizenship, and the transmission mechanisms between citizen action and the outcomes we seek are often unpredictable or poorly understood. To be sure, strong bonds of solidarity are vital to combat inequality and empower disenfranchised groups, but once forged, citizens must also pursue the common good together, in order to curb particularism and prevent domination by any set of interests. Civil society groups can do this by building bridges across the lines of class, race and gender, and by addressing their own internal challenges of governance, accountability and values-based action. Decisions about who we support in civil society and why are therefore crucial, but they yield different answers at different times and in different parts of the world.

Civil societies are not simply collections of associations and networks; they also function as spaces for public deliberation, argument and dissent. In this sense, they operate as communicative, 'public spheres' – a non-legislative, extra-judicial, public space in which societal differences, social problems, public policy, government action, and matters of community and identity are developed and debated. The extent to which such spaces thrive is crucial to the health and depth of democratic life. If only certain voices (those of the wealthy, for example, or those of a particular political orientation) dominate the public sphere, if only certain truths are represented, and if alternative viewpoints are silenced by exclusion or suppression, the "public interest" suffers.

Support for civil society associations has long been a part of Ford Foundation programming – including Non-Governmental Organizations of different kinds (NGOs), citizens' and community groups, churches, labor unions, networks and federations. Like a complex and fragile ecosystem, civil societies gain strength when grassroots groups, non-profit intermediaries and membership organizations are linked together in ways that promote collective goals, cross-society coalitions, mutual accountability, and shared action learning. Over the past ten years, Foundation support has broadened from the non-profit and philanthropic sector infrastructure to include a wider range of civil society associations, networks, coalitions and movements, and now the public sphere as a whole. In the late 1990s, work on philanthropy was given a sharper focus on social justice outcomes, and in 2001 a Global Civil Society portfolio was established to support the rise of transnational citizen action and explore its underpinnings in the multiple identities and overlapping citizenships that are beginning to emerge across the world. The integration of most of the Foundation's work on international cooperation into the Governance and Civil Society program in 2002 will enable our work on global civil society to expand into a new phase of its development.

Although work on 'political society' (such as political parties and parliaments) does not form part of the current civil society field, research is underway to clarify our potential role in this important area, since it is clear that democratic politics thrives best when embedded in healthy pre-political institutions in civil society and the public sphere.

Goals

The overall goal of PSJ's work in this field is **“to make civil societies a more effective force for peace, social justice and democratic renewal within, between and across the countries in which we work.”** Within this overarching goal, the Foundation has identified three sub-goals for its work:

- To increase the impact of citizens' groups and social movements working for peace and social justice by strengthening their capacities, accountabilities and connections with each other
- To strengthen enabling environments and indigenous resource mobilization strategies that can sustain such groups and movements in their work
- To strengthen democratic 'public spheres' at the national and global levels that encourage debate on key policy issues and enable citizen oversight of public and private power

Current and Future Grant making in Civil Society.

1. Increasing the impact of citizens' groups and social movements working for peace and social justice by strengthening their capacities, accountabilities and connections with each other.

In recent history, civil society organizations have been fundamental to social, economic and political reforms at the local and national levels across many different contexts, and now at the global level too. This is especially so when organizations of different kinds, and those representing different constituencies and causes, come together to form new social movements - alliances and coalitions that can sustain concerted and coordinated action at different levels over long periods of time. Although true social movements are rare, a large part of the Foundation's Civil Society program consists of support to elements of such movements, or to organizations and networks that we hope can play a role in facilitating their development. Current examples include 'Collaborations that Count', a major effort designed to forge stronger links between organizing and policy groups across eleven US states that is soon to be expanded into a new state-based strategy on civil society and social justice; a new federation of women elected to "Gram Panchayats" in India that advocates for policy change at the state and national levels; and Shack Dwellers International, the small arms campaign, Jubilee South and others in the global justice movement internationally. One of the goals of the Foundation's Foreign Policy Task Force (described in the Governance Field Statement) is to develop such a social movement in favor of multilateralism in the United States.

Clearly, cementing the connections between groups is a key element in such strategies, but strengthening the capacities that underlie their effectiveness within civil society organizations is just as important. These capacity-building priorities vary according to the organization and its context, but effective leadership and governance and accountability mechanisms are always important, as are diversity, and skills in communications, organizing and policy analysis (ideally all linked together). Support is often provided to capacity-building and other civil society support organizations at the regional and national levels that offer a broad range of services to large numbers of groups – for example the Western States Center and Board Source in the USA, IDASA in South Africa, the national NPO Network in China and the Trust for Civil Society in East and Central Europe.

A number of programs focus on nurturing new generations of civil society leaders committed to the cause of peace and social justice, such as the Uwongozi Institute in East Africa, a range of organizations that work with students on campuses in the USA, a comparative research project on leadership in social movements in Asia, and projects that support women leaders in the Middle East peace process and in foreign policy and international affairs in general. Particular attention is focused on the issue of NGO and foundation accountability, as the key to legitimacy and the best defense against attacks from overly-intrusive governments and others who wish to close down the space for independent citizen action. The Foundation is supporting a range of activities in this area at the national level (such as experimental NGO certification projects in India and Indonesia, and work on alternative models of foundation accountability in the US), and at the international level, where the issues are much more complex (such as the One World Trust “Accountability Index”). We expect this work to continue to grow in the future.

Since the linkages between the structure of civil society and the achievement of peace and social justice outcomes are not well understood (especially outside the USA), the Foundation continues to support research and dialogues designed to shed new light on these relationships in different contexts, and among different visions of civil society. For example, support has been provided to research on inter-religious ties and conflict in India, Indonesia and Nigeria, and to dialogues that explore the connections between organizational effectiveness and contemplative practice in US social justice groups.

2. Strengthening enabling environments and indigenous resource mobilization strategies that sustain such groups and movements in their work.

Civil society groups that work for peace and social justice are often dismissed as creations of foreign interests because of their high levels of dependence on foreign aid or foundation contributions. Building their financial independence (which means a diverse range of revenue sources strongly rooted in the local and national economy) is therefore essential, both as a condition of organizational effectiveness and as one of the keys to NGO legitimacy. The first priority in achieving these goals is to secure a legal, regulatory, and fiscal environment at the national level that can stimulate giving of different kinds, encourage citizen action and volunteering, protect freedom of

information and association, and balance government oversight with civil society autonomy. For example in India, the National Campaign for Freedom of Information provides a powerful, united front in favor of reforms that will benefit all civil society organizations, while support has also been provided to the Indian Government's Planning Commission on the reform of non-profit legislation. In China, we support comparative research on foundation and NGO law and on legal frameworks for corporate philanthropy. The International Center for Non-Profit Law hosts a website containing detailed information on the legal and regulatory environment for citizens' groups in over one hundred countries.

Another key element in promoting the development of indigenous resource mobilization strategies is philanthropy – channeling financial resources to civil society groups through independent foundations and foundation-like entities. Support to the growth and strengthening of indigenous philanthropy has long been a key part of the Ford Foundation's work in civil society, through a series of endowment grants and ongoing technical support to new Foundations in India, Bangladesh, Poland, Kenya, Mexico, South Africa, Mozambique and the USA, and some targeted support to the development of corporate giving programs in Colombia, Indonesia, Brazil, Egypt and Russia. We also provide support to the infrastructure of philanthropy in most of the countries in which we work, including national and international umbrella bodies such as the US Council of Foundations, the European Foundation Center, GIFE in Brazil, the East African Grantmakers' Association, the Asia-Pacific Philanthropy Consortium, and networks devoted to sharing experiences and building capacities among new and old foundations such as WINGS.

More recently, this work has been given a sharper focus on philanthropy for social justice. The long-term goal of this work is to knit together a global movement on philanthropy for social justice composed of national and regional foundations, specialized infrastructure and support organizations, and research and analytical capacities in universities, think tanks and philanthropic watchdog groups. In the US, early contributions have focused on building philanthropy in communities of color, among women's groups, and in the GLBT community. Elsewhere, new foundations have been launched to support work on human rights and with marginalized communities in India (covering "Dalits", or so-called "untouchables", and Women's rights), and plans are underway for similar institutions in South Africa, Brazil and the Middle East.

An important element in the emergence of a global movement in favor of social justice philanthropy is the development of a critical, comparative literature and research base on this subject that draws from diverse experiences and contexts, legitimizes such activities, and clarifies the connections that exist between different forms of philanthropy and the peace and social justice outcomes that we seek. At present we know little about these connections, especially outside the USA, but work is underway to correct these deficiencies. For example, a six-country study on "Islamic Philanthropy for Social Justice" began in 2003, and is soon to be joined by another set of case studies in five countries designed to draw out the connections between foundation funding sources,

internal foundation structures and decision-making mechanisms, and the impact foundations have on peace and social justice outcomes. A series of regional conferences is also planned (beginning in Latin America in 2003) and culminating, perhaps, in a landmark international event in 2005. Program Officers working on these issues are drawn together in a Foundation-wide 'Philanthropy Learning Group' that shares experiences of social justice philanthropy from around the world and undertakes collaborative research and programming activities.

3. Promoting democratic 'public spheres' at the national and global levels that encourage debate on key policy issues and enable citizen oversight of public and private power.

Although often neglected in research and programming, the concept of a "democratic public sphere" is central to any understanding of the links between civil society and social justice, and work designed to strengthen these public spheres forms an increasingly important component of the Civil Society field. Since a vibrant and independent media is crucial to the health of the public sphere, such work is often undertaken in collaboration with colleagues in the Media, Arts and Culture Unit (MAC), and in Human Rights. The distinctive contribution of the Civil Society field lies in strengthening the communications capacities of associations and movements that work for peace and social justice, supporting watchdog groups that promote accountability in the public and private sectors, and protecting spaces for public dialogue that generate conversations across sectors and interest groups and bring excluded voices into the debate.

Strengthening the communications and media capacities of civil society organizations, networks and movements is an increasingly important priority. In the US, for example, support is provided to the SPIN Project to provide training and capacity building in these areas to citizens groups nationwide. Another grant, to the Progressive Communicators Network, enables pioneers in this arena to share ideas and experiences with each other and codify the lessons of their experience as a contribution to field building. Similar efforts are about to begin in India and South Africa. In Palestine, the focus is placed on grants to civil society organizations for projects that enhance the independent media. Occasional support is also provided to print and other media vehicles that promote peace and social justice agendas in public debates, such as the American Prospect magazine in the USA.

The second strategy used by the Foundation to strengthen democratic public spheres is to protect and extend the role of independent watchdog groups in civil society and build their research and communications capacities. Such groups have a proven record in exposing corruption, malpractice and conflicts of interest in the public and private sectors and thus promoting the public good in politics and public policy. They include the Center for Public Integrity (CPI) and the National Security Archive (NSA) in the US, India's Public Affairs Center, and a range of neighborhood-based groups in Indonesia. CPI specializes in monitoring and publicizing the links between campaign contributions

and political decision-making, and in evaluating the potential impact of measures such as media deregulation and placing the results in the public arena for debate.

A third characteristic of a healthy public sphere is the presence of independent spaces – physical, virtual and intellectual - in which diverse views and voices can argue out the great issues of the day and come to a democratic consensus about the best way forward. These spaces help to protect room for dissent, generate new solutions to public policy problems, and build coalitions and alliances across the lines of class, race, gender and ideology. Although such public conversations are easier in small communities of face-to-face interaction, advances in Information Technology, and the impact of globalization, are generating new possibilities for public engagement at the global level. Increasingly, we are taking advantage of these opportunities to extend the public sphere in exciting new directions. For example, support from numerous Foundation offices goes to the World Social Forum, an annual event that brings together 100,000 people and more from civil societies the world over under the rubric of “another world is possible.” OpenDemocracy, a new, interactive web-based venture with subscribers and contributors from over one hundred countries, bills itself as a space for intelligent conversation between people of different viewpoints about politics and economics. We expect work on the public sphere to grow significantly over the next five years.
