

Role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The invaluable role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in contributing to global sustainable development cannot be overstated. This paper delves into the origins and multifaceted nature of CSOs, providing insight into their crucial contributions. By carefully examining scholarly debates and leveraging secondary sources, this paper emphasises the urgent imperative of sustainable development, emphasising the pressing need for a safe earth, life, and livelihood for future generations. Furthermore, the paper underscores the significance of the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030, stressing the importance of international partnerships, policy reform, gender mainstreaming, and community-driven development in achieving these goals. This paper also provides some in-built recommendations for engaging CSOs in broader aspects of sustainable development through international partnership, localization, policy reform, capacity building, gender mainstreaming, streaming of climate change in planning and critical interventions, community-driven development, and empowering of grassroots and marginalised people.

Keywords

Advocacy, CSOs, global partnership, localization, policy, sustainable development, wellbeing

Introduction

The term 'civil society' originated in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. According to Rojas (1999), liberals saw civil society as the purest form for organising social, economic, and political life. On the other hand, Marxists viewed civil society as the arena for economic relations that shaped the political order represented in the state. Essentially, for Marx, civil society was synonymous with bourgeois society. Kaviraj and Khilnani (2001) identified at least three distinct strands in contemporary discussions about civil society. Communist systems consistently expanded the legal jurisdiction and effective control of state institutions, like the bureaucracy, over nearly all social spheres.

After the collapse of these states, it was argued that there was a need to promote the growth of 'civil society' institutions beyond the state's legal jurisdiction.

There are at least two strands of current leftist political thought in the West that are also keen to revive the idea of civil society for reasons only partially comparable. Radical theorists, after their disillusionment with the ideas of socialism and its distinct soiling by the Communist experience, wish to radicalise the concept of democracy by re-invoking notions of civil society. However, it is important to note that civil society is not without its challenges and criticisms. Some argue that it can be co-opted by the state or powerful interest groups, while others question its inclusivity and representation. These challenges and criticisms provide a balanced view and stimulate critical thinking about civil society.

The concept of civil society gained prominence during the 1970s in Eastern Europe and has since become widespread globally for two main reasons. Firstly, it involves mobilising diverse groups to discuss the development of the public sphere. Secondly, civil society became more prevalent in discussing governmental crises and the lack of legitimacy of traditional political parties, which were rooted in a representative rather than participatory democracy. Chandhoke (2007) strongly urged that the idea of civil society still retains critical value. Theorists locate it in a particular context. As for examples, from an Asian perspective, Alagappa (2004) mentioned that civil society has the potential to liberate citizens from the oppressive state and confer complete economic and political freedom on them. Nakamura et al. (2001) revealed that Islamic civil society in Southeast Asia had emerged in the mid-1990s and its presence in various ways, including voluntary association, education, healthcare, credits, self-help schemes, and job opportunities.

The United Nations (UN, 2003) articulated that civil society in India is often considered synonymous with the terms 'voluntary sector', 'voluntary organisations', 'non-government organisations (NGOs)', and 'non-profit organisations (NPOs)'. However, it's important to note that civil society encompasses a larger group than these terms imply. The rise of social movements, NGOs, and voluntary organisations in the 20th century led to the conceptualisation of the term civil society. It formally entered the popular discourse in the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, multiple definitions are associated with civil society in India, given the vast and diverse nature of the bodies that fall under its ambit. Civil society is viewed as creating a modern citizenry in China, the largest country in Asia, through the inspiration of civic awareness, social mobilisation, and movement (Brook & Frolic, 2015). This clarification will help the reader understand the various interpretations and applications of civil society in different contexts.

Literature Review

CSOs concept

Three aspects are essential for broadening the understanding of civil society. First, the liberal perspective determines the context and areas of civil society. Second, Marxist theory shows how economic context and relationships determine civil society, with the bourgeoisie constituting civil society. Third, the political aspect of civil society lies outside the state dichotomy. These three aspects allow civil society to involve different actors motivated by various goals, including economic vision, social logic, and a political perspective. Economic vision represented by business groups, cartels, unions and so on. 'Social logic' refers to the underlying principles and values that guide the actions of social groups. For instance, associations of volunteers, ethnic groups, grassroots organisations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are all examples of actors in civil society motivated by social logic. Ehrenberg (2017) indicated that political corruption, incapacity, or unwillingness of the political class are significant causes of the emergence of 'civil society' to raise welfare issues in general and vigorous social movements in American society. Civil rights, anti-war, and women's movements understood the importance of addressing society and proposing comprehensive critiques that mobilised many people.

Edwards and Schmitz (2021) highlighted that early on, 'civil society' had been growing in the professionalisation of associational life, and the rise of lobby groups and NGOs increasingly replaced grassroots-focused membership organisations. They argued for excluding hate groups focused on eliminating basic rules of civic engagement while also expanding the field to include traditional community-based groups in Africa and elsewhere. It is necessary to abandon an overly Western model of civil society.

The concept of civil society is complex. Civil society can be defined as organised voluntarily as opposed to being organised through state machinery. The totality of organisations formed by the citizens outside the state and the market to support aspects of social life where a common interest exists. The boundaries between the state, civil society and market are often complex. Civil society commonly holds diverse spaces, actors, and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy, and power. Civil societies, with their diverse actors, are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, NGOs, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, environmental organisations, coalitions, and advocacy groups.

Sustainable development's origin, scope, and dimension

Although the term 'Sustainable Development' is often used, it means different things to ecologists, environmental planners, economists, social workers, and environmental activists. The lack of agreement on what to sustain leads to conceptual confusion about the term. 'Sustainability' may refer to sustaining the resource base or its livelihoods. It also encompasses maintaining levels of production and consumption (Redclift, 1995). The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD, 2010), a Canadian think tank organisation, defines sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs and sometimes the livelihoods derived from it. It also referred to sustaining levels of production and consumption (Redclift, 1995).

Sustainable development appeared in the global discourse after two decades when development was considered only from an ecological standpoint. The term sustainable development was first publicly used at a meeting held in Stockholm, Sweden, during the early 1970s. It was defined as a commitment to a more equitable development characterised by intergenerational solidarity, democratic control, and citizen participation in decisions about the physical, economic, and social environment. 'Ecodevelopment' is considered viable global progress because this form of development is socially just, ecologically, and economically compatible. However, increased awareness about global environmental concerns led to the decline in popularity of the term 'ecodevelopment' within more recent political-environmental dialogue.

The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil 1992, signalled the evolution of the global environmental movement responding to a growing environmental crisis. The Rio Summit reaffirmed the Declaration of Stockholm and sought new worldwide agreements and commitments for a new paradigm of sustainable development (Rojas, 1999). At the same time, the paradigm was a new contract that required renewed levels of cooperation between governments, civil society, and businesses. This contract respected the interests of all concerned and recognised environmental phenomena integral and interdependent nature. This paradigm provided the contextual framework for the concept of sustainable development.

Opinions vary about sustainable development's scope, usefulness, and related terms. For many, the terms have different linguistic meanings. Sustained is that which is itself (that is, the ecosystem), whereas sustainable refers to something that should be sustained (that is, an unbalanced ecosystem). Sustainment refers to the efforts at reaching a state of equilibrium in a system. The concept of sustainable development is not just a local issue, but a global responsibility. It advocates for the current generation

to consume enough of the earth's resources to meet their subsistence, while ensuring the living conditions of future generations are not endangered. This approach values the use of available resources, promotes reduced consumption, and avoids excessive consumption. It also encourages environmentally friendly standards of production and low population growth. Moreover, it fosters a national commitment to equitable, sustainable development models that aim to eradicate poverty and promote a citizenry that respects these principles.

The Brundtland Commission, also known as the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), emphasises development issues and prioritises the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development is a process that harmonizes the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change. This harmony enhances both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations. It views sustainable development as a policy objective, a methodological approach, and a normative goal, marking the endpoint of development aspirations.

Agenda- 21 addresses today's pressing problems and aims to prepare the world for the next century's challenges, reflecting a global consensus and political commitment at the highest level on development and environmental cooperation. It describes action, objectives, activities and means of implementation. It will be carried out by the various actors according to the different situations, capacities, and priorities of countries and regions with full respect to all the principles contained in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. Its successful implementation is, first and foremost, the responsibility of Governments. National strategies, plans, policies, and processes are crucial in achieving these goals. International cooperation should support and supplement such national efforts. In this context, the United Nations has a vital role to play. Other sub-regional, regional, and global organisations are also called upon to contribute to this effort (Patterson & Theobald, 1995).

From Agenda 21, it is clear that sustainable development is a socioeconomic and ecological process characterised by fulfilling human needs while maintaining the quality of the natural environment indefinitely. Sustainable development focuses on more than just environmental issues. More broadly, its policies include three significant areas. These are: a) economic, b) environmental, and c) social. As per the United Nations World Summit Outcome Document (2005), "Interdependent and Mutually Reinforcing Pillars" of sustainable development are viewed as economic development, social development, and environmental development (Brown, 2006).

United Nations Division for Sustainable Development covers the following areas within the scope of sustainable development. These are agriculture, atmosphere,

biodiversity, capacity building, climate change, consumption and production patterns, demographics, desertification and drought, disaster reduction and management, education and awareness, energy, finance, forests, fresh waters, health, human settlements, indicators, industry, information for decision making and participation, integrated decision making, international law, international cooperation for enabling environment, institutional arrangements, land management, national sustainable development strategy, oceans and seas, poverty and sanitation.

Janoušková and Moldan (2018) highlighted that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by world leaders in 2015, came into force. These goals, building on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), are a global call to action, requiring all countries to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. As the SDGs are not legally binding, it is crucial for governments to take ownership and establish national frameworks for achieving the 17 Goals and 169 Targets. This underscores the pivotal role of governments in following up and reviewing the progress made in implementing the Goals and Targets, a task that necessitates quality, accessible and timely data collection. The SDGs primarily emphasise people, the planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership, and it is through the diligent efforts of governments that these goals can be realised.

There are two dimensions for establishing a conceptual framework of sustainable development: 1) Economic and 2) Political. The economic dimension assumes that sustainable development's social and environmental aspects must be considered along with economic considerations, such as economic efficiency in resource allocation. Economic arguments have been conducted based on the present and future anticipated demand levels, assessing the costs of foregone economic growth, and paying closer attention to environmental factors (Rojas, 1999). The global externalities today, notably the greenhouse effect and the depletion of the ozone layer, are not the product of scarcity but of reckless and unsustainable production system.

The political dimension of sustainability consists of two elements: 1) the political process through which the environment is managed, and 2) the knowledge and power for controlling world views of the environment and resources. These two elements are separate but interconnected. The environmental agenda concerns the environment and the implications for socio-political relations of bringing the environment under human control. Poor rural communities often resist being subjected to a worldview they cannot endorse, in much the same way that people in developed countries often challenge overarching theories, such as psychoanalysis or Marxism. Frequently, individuals with relatively less power, because their knowledge

systems are devalued or because they do not have economic power, resist in ways that may appear passive: they keep their own counsel and show 'respect' towards powerful outsiders but fail to cooperate.

Approaches to sustainable development

The Western approach towards development sometimes overlooks that the development paradigm, especially the sustainable development paradigm, carries a message familiar to almost all societies. This is because the market and the local environment provide a basis for the development of society (Karl, 2002). However, there is now another and unfamiliar concept of how to govern these resources: namely, through democracy and decentralisation. Democracy, with its concepts of equality, freedom, and human rights, is a qualitative concept that is closely linked to the introduction of the free market under the current development pattern. Economic globalisation, which sets all humanity into one economic unit, is the carrier for the worldwide introduction of capitalism and market values, including competition, growth, and wealth accumulation. This global economic integration, when guided by democratic principles, can contribute to sustainable development.

Munslow and Ekoko (1995) mentioned that participation and empowerment are essential to sustainable development. People's empowerment has centred on moves towards decentralisation and the strengthening of civil society. Whilst there is no strict correlation between democracy and sustainable development, some items in the democratic package can be prioritised and can help build sustainable development, particularly transparency in the management of resources, protecting human rights and encouraging social participation. Massuanganhe (2009) also identified that sustainable development can only be realised with robust, solid institutions and active citizenry engaged in crucial decision-making. Political leaders should promote good governance by strengthening institutions and public participation to address national and local development agendas.

Sustainable development is considered a viable option for the future. It is essential to avoid a single global definition of sustainable development, like in Agenda 21. Instead, the implementation process should focus on promoting various local definitions of sustainable development based on local values and visions. These local, sustainable development paradigms better serve global sustainability, emphasising the need to promote ecologically friendly production and consumption. Two separate components are needed to implement sustainability successfully. First, the sustainability perspective identifies a society's sustainable vision, a qualitative paradigm. Second, sustainable development is a framework for action, an action plan

that can be measured quantitatively to achieve progress towards sustainability (Karl, 2002).

Understanding the insights from local, sustainable development paradigms for implementing sustainability worldwide will be interesting. The sustainable development implementation process should involve recovering the concept of community and its decision-making power over resource use and development priorities. This means that global governance to promote sustainable development must become a radically decentralised system that offers local, regional, national, and international equity. Hawkins and Wang (2012) found that sustainable development is complex and requires specialised skills, so a network of organisations can enhance the capacity of local governments to plan and implement sustainability initiatives. Collaboration among local governments, community residents, and organisations creates an enabling environment for sustainable development.

Method

This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of civil society organisations' (CSOs) origins, characteristics, and diverse commitments. It delves into scholarly discussions on their emergence and operations, offering valuable insights for those engaged in these organisations. Reviewing secondary sources was crucial in conducting data collection and content analysis.

Findings

At the end of the twentieth century, civilization seemed a parameter in measuring the increasing role of CSOs in promoting and carrying out sustainable development. CSOs' role in sustainable development has several manifestations. Sometimes, it has emphasised the participation and mobilisation of individuals and groups to attain common social objectives. These objectives focus on the sustainability of resources and government accountability related to community development. Civil society is considered to serve the valuable function of providing a social safety net that would counter the extremes of poverty without extending the role of government (Eileen, 2007).

There are many examples of civil society participation and mobilisation in defence of the global environment. A considerable number of CSOs work on topics related to conservation and sustainable development. Other CSOs participate in inspecting business activities and individuals whose behaviours endanger the earth's sustainability. Annan-Aggrey et al. (2022) revealed that the local government level is

increasingly recognised as the critical locus of development effort, mainly because the SDGs are relevant to local jurisdictions and change can be tangibly measured at more minor scales. CSOs are collaboratively working with local government institutions, leading to more effective and targeted sustainable development initiatives.

An increasing global consciousness regarding environmental threats has sparked a surge of civil societies devoted to sustainable development. These organisations have successfully advocated for changes in national constitutions, the creation of protective legislation, and increased public awareness on a global scale. Greenpeace, in particular, has played a vital role in mobilising public support against environmental disasters and has influenced international policy. These efforts have fostered a global appreciation for the value of our natural resources and sparked essential discussions on the need for a balance between resource exploitation and environmental preservation.

Developing countries, in particular, have benefited from the support of CSOs from developed nations in conserving vital land masses. Acknowledging the diverse challenges different regions face in implementing sustainable development goals is crucial. Civil society organisations are at the forefront of holding governments accountable, and their involvement is essential in ensuring progress towards these goals.

CSOs play significant roles in advocacy, which includes intervention and policy to support the rights of ethnic minorities to the culture and territory under the shape of sustainable development. In this context, the action of organisations that promote collaboration and dialogue as strategies for achieving peace in areas of high environmental abuse caused by warring conflicts constitutes a significant contribution.

In addition, advocacy organisations lobby before legislative bodies and other government organisations to establish public policies or legal frameworks favourable to sustainable development. Within this scope of action, CSOs support the design, monitoring, and evaluation processes of local and national development plans, including environmental action plans, through their participation.

Khoo and Tan (2019) indicated that SDGs are significant in two ways. First, they acknowledge rights in a way that the predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), should have paid more attention to. Second, the SDGs mark a turning point in approach, from focusing on a right to development to a human rights-based approach (HRBA). Malaysian CSOs contribute to implementing SDGs works through a localization approach, though they face challenges. Akinsolu and Raji (2019) also mentioned that coordinated efforts and increased synergies between CSOs and the government accelerate the progress toward attaining SDGs in developing countries.

Discussions and Implications

CSOs contribute to formulating public policy, advocating at the practice level, and implementing projects related to sustainable development. They play roles in global decision-making and grassroots-level implementations. No nation can individually achieve sustainable development goals; global partnership is essential in this regard. This section underscores the comprehensive approach of CSOs, linking socio-economic, cultural, political, technological, environmental, and policy perspectives. The contents are very thematic, sectoral, and contextual.

One CSO, the FES Foundation of Colombia, established Colombia's first nature reserve in the early 1980s, long before there was talk of sustainable development. Twenty years later, over a hundred nature reserves, which could have a static connotation in that they maintain and preserve all found within specific borders, have evolved toward the idea of CSOs providing environmental services. These services have included securing forests that otherwise would be exploited for coal and establishing biosphere reserves and environmental administration zones in which CSOs have mobilised participation to implement their action (Wagle, 1999).

CSOs also have been involved in designing and analysing policy proposals at sub-regional, regional, and international levels through research and the efforts of multi-sector working groups. The work of CSO *Centro Andino para el Desarrollo Sostenible* has provided the five countries that compose the Andean Community with the capability to make sound public policy decisions related to sustainable development. The MacArthur Foundation in the USA and the FES Foundation of Colombia funded this initiative.

Therefore, it is learned that CSOs should focus on capacity-building at the local community level to support a community-driven approach to sustainability and establish and strengthen mechanisms to share experience and knowledge between community groups at national and international levels. It is necessary to involve the community in planning, implementation, monitoring, research, and collaboration with Government Organisations (GOs), NGOs and private bodies. It is also essential to ensure their transparency, tolerance, and non-violent actions, establish equality of ethnic, cultural, and sexual groups and diversify equality in their bodies, mechanisms, and actions.

In their 2012 study, Fulda and Song brought to light the pioneering work of the Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA) in Beijing. SSCA, a leading force in the new wave of humanistic, community-based Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), has significantly reshaped the state-society dynamic in China. By fostering collaboration between local government agencies and Chinese civil society organisations, SSCA has

led the way towards public management and network governance. The organisation's focus on promoting community independence for sustainable ecology offers valuable lessons for other CSOs. It underscores the importance of prioritising long-term self-sustainability over dependency on external funding and guidelines. Additionally, SSCA's emphasis on self-regulation, diverse representation within the organisation, women's empowerment in decision-making, respect for Indigenous communities' cultural integrity and rights, and advocacy for business leaders to support CSOs through voluntary contributions of human and financial resources, provides a roadmap for other CSOs to follow.

Nakamura et al. (2001) emphasised the impactful efforts of Southeast Asian Islamic civil society in areas such as education, healthcare, access to credit, and employment opportunities. Similarly, Zaidan et al. (2019) underscored the rising commitment of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Arab countries towards sustainable development. Strengthening the partnership between global civil society and regional CSOs within the United Nations' decision-making and implementation processes is crucial for fostering worldwide collaboration. However, it is important to note that CSOs in Arabian countries face unique challenges, such as limited resources, political instability, and cultural barriers, which may hinder their effectiveness.

Establishing an enabling environment for community organisations and individuals, creating a network of community-based learning centres, sharing knowledge and experiences among communities, facilitating dialogues among stakeholders, and implementing effective education and training programmes are imperative for promoting sustainable livelihoods and preserving local natural resources. While CSOs in Arabian countries may be perceived as weaker, Malaolu and Ogbuabor (2017) revealed that CSOs and Voluntary Organisations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs) are pivotal in enhancing public transparency and accountability. They achieve this by raising awareness about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among government agencies and the general public, engaging the private sector, monitoring SDG projects, amplifying the voices of marginalised populations, and combating corruption in African countries.

Conclusion

The state, market, and civil society organisations (CSOs) are separate yet interconnected entities crucial for overall well-being. This paper emphasises the pivotal role of CSOs as a cornerstone for sustainable development. Their relevance cannot be dismissed due to their intangible nature. The innovative endeavours of CSOs signify a global movement toward championing sustainable development. There exists

a symbiotic relationship where the sustainability of CSOs hinges on societal support, and conversely, ongoing societal well-being relies on CSO accomplishments. Amplifying the voices of CSOs, including those of women and Indigenous people at various levels, will be instrumental in advancing the UN human rights agenda and sustainable development paradigms. Despite encountering challenges, CSOs have abundant opportunities to propel the sustainable development process. Therefore, it is the responsibility of global and local actors to rally behind CSOs and fortify their capacities to further their substantial contributions to sustainable development.

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